



Transnational Diffusion and Cooperation in the Middle East

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The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see <http://www.pomeps.org>.

The Arab world never seemed more unified than during the incandescent days of the 2011 Arab uprisings. Tunisia's revolution clearly and powerfully inspired Arabs everywhere to take to the streets. Egypt's January 25 uprising that led to the removal of Hosni Mubarak taught Arab citizens and leaders alike that victory by protestors could succeed. The subsequent wave of protests involved remarkable synergies that could not plausibly be explained without reference to transnational diffusion. Bahrainis, Yemenis and Jordanians alike attempted to replicate the seizure and long-term encampments in Egypt's Tahrir Square and protestors across the Arab world chanted the same slogans and waved the same signs.

But what happened in the months and years after those heady days? Did similar processes of diffusion and cross-national learning shape the post-uprisings era? Did autocratic regimes learn from one another in the same way that protestors did? In June, more than a dozen scholars came together in Hamburg, Germany for a workshop jointly organized by the Project on Middle East Political Science and the German Institute for Global Affairs. The workshop closely examined learning, diffusion and demonstration across autocratic regimes during the Arab counter-revolution. The papers for that workshop, available here as an open access PDF download, closely examine the ways in which Arab autocrats did – and did not – learn from one another.

Diffusion and demonstration effects continued at the societal level, of course, but often took different forms than in the peak days of revolutionary enthusiasm. Tunisia's Ennahda handed over power in August 2013 soon after Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood had been toppled in a military coup. Syria's descent into a horrifying civil war offered a cautionary tale to would-be challengers across the region, discouraging once hopeful protestors elsewhere. The images and news from Syria inspired a remarkable number of individuals to open their pocketbooks or leave their homes to join the struggle, but as time went on, the relentless parade of horrific images also served to deter would-be challengers from taking the risk of protest.

But what about at the level of regimes? Maria [Josua](#) observes that authoritarian regimes adopted a number of remarkably similar policy responses to mass protest, including the denial of access to public space, dehumanizing discourses and mobilization of a xenophobic nationalism. Protestors across countries found themselves labeled – in remarkably similar language – foreign-backed provocateurs, alien agitators or drug-addled criminals.

But such similarities do not, in and of themselves, prove that diffusion or learning have actually taken place. As German scholars Thomas Richter and André Bank [emphasize](#), not everything that looks like diffusion is necessarily so. Many policy responses may simply be obvious tactics available to any reasonably competent political actor, not innovations that had to be learned. Authoritarian regimes hardly needed to be taught to torture or jail their own people, strip citizenship from dissidents, monitor social media, clear the streets of protestors or censor the media.

Even more plausible cases of learning may not have been quite as they appeared. The Turkish military did not need the Egyptian example to conceive of the possibility of an effective coup. On the contrary, Turkey has been profoundly shaped by a number of successful military coups over several decades – likely more potent influences than an Egyptian coup that had been loudly and violently denounced across the Turkish political spectrum for three years. However, while coups may not spark imitation rebellions elsewhere, according to Jonathan Powell and Curtis Bell, they do often prompt pre-emptive repression by potentially threatened leaders.

In Tunisia, Ennahda's decision to cede power in the summer of 2013 looked to many observers like an obvious reaction to Egypt's coup, but Monica Marks has carefully [documented](#) it had more to do with local Tunisian and internal party dynamics. In short, many seemingly similar outcomes are in fact common responses to a similar cause, filtered through local particularities, creating dangerous opportunities to over-predict diffusion.

The contributors to POMEPS Studies 21 Transnational Diffusion and Cooperation in the Middle East go considerably further than past studies have done to show how significant learning and diffusion did take place among Arab regimes in the years following the uprisings. Demonstrating diffusion and learning requires careful attention to timing and sequence. It also requires scrutiny of the mechanisms by which ideas are transmitted, whether passively as actors observe events in the media, or actively as agents make direct efforts to spread those ideas. While direct evidence of the thinking and interactions between secretive autocrats may be hard to gather, these scholars carefully trace the timing and sequencing of these processes to show where learning and diffusion mattered. Such careful scrutiny of local conditions and the precise mechanisms of diffusion introduces healthy skepticism into the research agenda, but it does not lead to the conclusion that no diffusion occurred. Today's Arab world is profoundly shaped by forces promoting transnational interactions, from pervasive social media and satellite television to weakening states, refugee flows, cross-border military interventions.

Authoritarian learning may be indirect and partial, as desperate regimes experiment with various strategies which have worked for them in the past or which more recently have seemed to be working for their friends. Steven Heydemann, who for years has been at the vanguard of studying the processes of authoritarian upgrading and cooperation, describes a distinct political ecology within which regimes have learned survival strategies. Reinoud Leenders goes further in his compelling account of “counter-revolutionary bricolage,” in which threatened regimes are “pursuing their international linkages to cobble together counter-revolutionary policies, strategies and tactics from a variety of repertoires or tested methods of governance... regime incumbents reassemble these elements in adjusted forms for local use as they seek effective measures to counter challenges to their rule.” Surveillance of dissidents might be standard practice for these regimes, for instance, but they still needed to learn specific methods for infiltrating and exploiting social media. Leaders scrutinizing the divergent early international responses to the repression of protests in Egypt, Bahrain and Libya might learn lessons about how much and what kind of violence they could safely deploy. Such learning is indirect, filtered through local experience, and tailored to particular conditions – but clearly manifests transnational influences.

Sean Yom, by contrast, observes a more active process by which Arab monarchs came together in novel ways to pursue collective self-defense. In Yom's account, the diffusion of policy instruments, along with material support and technical assistance, is much more direct and intentional. Kevin Koehler and Ruth Santini trace similarly intentional diffusion through a close observation of security cooperation and the sharing of military and policing practices across autocratic regimes. Those influences include international alliances, as Leenders and Schlumberger note. The willingness of the United States to sell arms and to remain supportive of even the most brutally repressive among its allies, from Bahrain to Egypt, challenges popular theories of moderating influence of democratic allies and offers an alternative channel by which such autocratic practices might spread among allies.

The consolidation of a “monarchies club,” the adoption of common practices of surveillance and repression, the spread of distinctive new forms of sectarianism, and more have all unfolded at the regional level. Most states in the region have grown weaker over the last five years, resorting to ever-fiercer domestic repression out of a profound sense of threat and ever more brazen military and political interventions abroad. Transnational forces will only grow stronger, from growing transnational sectarian identities and networks to the relentless expansion of borderless social media. Cross-national diffusion and learning are likely to be an increasingly prominent feature of Middle Eastern politics. The contributions to POMEPS Studies 21 have decisively advanced our understanding of these processes of diffusion and learning in regional politics. Download it today.

Marc Lynch
POMEPS Director

Transnational Diffusion and Cooperation in the Middle East and North Africa: A Conceptual Note

Thomas Richter & André Bank, GIGA Hamburg

The Arab uprisings of 2011 and their aftermath were significantly shaped by transnational processes. Three prominent examples of these processes are the rapid diffusion of opposition demonstrations, protest repertoires and slogans from Tunisia to Egypt and on to other countries; the sequential use of similar regime reactions in policing, repression, and counter-insurgency; and the spread of almost identical sectarian discourses across the Middle East, including to countries without Shi'a populations. In addition to these often indirect but supposedly interdependent mechanisms, there have also been significant direct and coordinated interventions as well as concrete moments of cooperation by states, groups of states, and transnational movements to either support or suppress protests. Even though such a transnational perspective encompassing diffusion processes and cooperation patterns is not completely new to the study of Middle Eastern politics more broadly, it has only rarely been employed to understand crucial current political dynamics such as those that followed the Arab uprisings.

The papers in this series grew out of an international workshop co-sponsored by the International Diffusion and Cooperation of Authoritarian Regimes (IDCAR) project based at the German Institute of Global and Area studies (GIGA) and POMEPS and held in Hamburg, Germany on June 8-9, 2016. Inspired by the current state of research in the field of diffusion studies, in this introductory note we outline a broad conceptual framework that could help to better locate and connect many of the past, ongoing, and future transnational processes prevalent across the Middle East and beyond. We strongly believe that the exploration and analysis of the transnational dimensions of the post-Arab uprisings dynamics will contribute to a better understanding of similar future events in at least three important ways: First, diffusion and cooperation might generally enable us to better capture the strong interconnectedness of some of the most relevant political

dynamics that have emerged throughout the Middle East since late 2010 than do the traditional understandings that entail looking at the national and local causes of daily politics. Second, a perspective that looks at processes of diffusion and cooperation helps to isolate previously overlooked ways of influencing politics beyond and below the state from traditional mechanisms for influencing regional politics – such as, for instance, coercion and state intervention. Third, systematically studying the transnational dynamics of such a regionally and globally relevant series of events as the Arab uprisings should also yield important, fresh insights for more general political science debates about transnational dynamics, including diffusion and cooperation, their underlying logics, and the forces that have led to policy change and the stability and change of (Middle Eastern) authoritarian regimes in particular.

Research in comparative politics, especially on democratization, has often considered diffusion to be a neutral, uncoordinated development that spreads throughout the world (Brinks and Coppedge, 2006; Starr and Lindborg, 2003), in accordance with Rogers's definition of diffusion as a "process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system" (Rogers, 1995: 10). Thus, diffusion often refers to the more or less spontaneous spread of ideas through media and communication channels. Many diffusion studies based on this understanding provide statistical correlations or find patterns that leave out the actors involved (sender and receiver). Further, they often do not specify the concrete manner or channels, let alone the mechanisms, through which the relevant innovations travel, emerge, and abate.

A more recent strand of diffusion research suggests distinguishing various kinds of mechanisms by looking at the interdependence between two units or actors, whereby (policy) choices in one unit reflect (policy) choices in some

of the other units (e.g. Elkins and Simmons, 2005; Gilardi, 2011). According to this understanding, diffusion can be conceptually distinguished from two other trends. First, political change or institutional reform could be the result of a *similar response to similar conditions* without looking at the behavior of other actors in other states. Second, reform or change might be related to *cooperation* as the coordinated effort of one state, a group of states, or an international institution (Elkins and Simmons, 2005: 35).

While *state intervention* and *coercion* fall outside the scope of this concept due to the massive pressure exercised by more powerful actors, which often entails violence, the diffusion literature emphasizes that *learning*, *emulation*, and *competition* are the three core mechanisms of diffusion (Maggetti and Gilardi, 2016). From a transnational perspective, *learning* relates to the idea that the adoption of one unit's policies or institutional changes by another is based on the recognition of a problem and the willingness to solve it by looking at the experiences of others.¹ Inspired by sociological institutionalism, transnational *emulation* is a kind of adaptation, which goes back to the idea that actors or units will implement (policy) change in order to conform to their normative environments. *Competition* at a transnational level, finally, can be seen as an adaptation made by units in order to attract or retain resources at the global or regional level.

Research on the diffusion of social action, protest, and anti-regime discourse has been clearly at the forefront of studies on the Middle East since 2011. This research has identified important regional specifics compared to earlier waves of protest in other parts of the world (Weyland 2012; Patel et al., 2014) and has demonstrated the degree of interconnectedness based on protest experiences versus geographic proximity (Lynch et al., 2014).

It is interesting to note that in the recent diffusion literature on the Middle East a perspective on

1 From an analytical perspective that does not primarily focus on transnational dynamics, the sources of learning can certainly be domestic and, for instance, date back in time (domestic learning, historical learning, cf. Bank/Edel 2015).

transnational learning prevails. The popular uprisings that spread across many Arab countries over the course of a few days and weeks in early 2011 underline the fact that oppositional activists learned from each other, with similar protest repertoires, such as the occupation of central squares (e.g. in Cairo, Sana'a, Manama), or the same anti-regime slogans appearing in different places around the same time (Patel et al., 2014). In one of the first systematic contributions to this emergent research field with a view to the Arab uprisings, Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders highlight the "adaptive capacity" (Heydemann and Leenders, 2014: 76) of incumbent Arab regimes and present illuminating evidence on how the Syrian regime under President Bashar al-Assad in particular closely studied the Libyan case, trying to learn from the perceived failures of Colonel Gaddafi's counter-insurgency strategy (Heydemann and Leenders, 2014: 78ff). Building on these insights, André Bank and Mirjam Edel (2015) differentiate between spatial (from home vs. abroad) and temporal (from present vs. [recent] past) sources of regime learning. They also examine whether incumbent elite learning in the context of regime crises is primarily about emulating successful cases or avoiding the failures of others considered similar. While most of the regime learning is arguably negative – i.e. avoiding duplicating the mistakes of others, such as the Syrian regime learning from "failed" Libya – there are also single examples of regime learning from successful examples. Jordan's almost unprecedented constitutional reform in 2011 very much followed the successful Moroccan script, in terms of both its design and the "reform steps" taken (Bank/Edel 2015, 12f.). An opposite perspective that looks instead at regime (re) actions has so far found no systematic evidence of similar wave-like diffusion effects among ousted or surviving Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes (Josua, 2016).

While the learning processes of both oppositional activists and authoritarian regime elites have contributed to a better understanding of some of the transnational dynamics of post-Arab uprisings politics in the Middle East and North Africa, more research is needed to better capture the specific conditions under which learning has led to success, or not, in achieving a certain policy goal.

In both International Relations and Comparative Politics literature, the concept of *cooperation* is often ill-defined, abstract, and normatively loaded. Frequently, cooperation is understood as the opposite of conflict, confrontation, and competition, or it is viewed as an early stage of regional integration. As a textbook definition claims, “cooperation is action for the common benefit. [...] [It] is at the core of the issues of conviviality, democracy, peaceful coexistence between different communities, and the preservation of human life” (Colomer, 2011: 447). Recent events in the Middle East have shown, however, that cooperation can also take place for less noble purposes. Especially among the monarchies, the early events of the Arab uprisings triggered a decisive increase in inter-monarchical cooperation (Yom 2014; Bank, Richter, Sunik 2015), as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) intervention in Bahrain and the ensuing scheme of security cooperation across the Gulf and with Jordan and Morocco illustrates.

A more balanced and less normatively loaded definition of cooperation is provided by Robert Keohane. According to him, cooperation occurs when actors adjust their behavior to the actual or anticipated preferences of others through a process of policy coordination (Keohane, 2005: 51–52). Based on a classic realist assumption in IR theory, cooperation requires an asymmetrical relationship – for instance, a hegemon (such as the United States at the global level) bears the coordination costs for a cooperation-based international regime in a first step of *hegemonic cooperation*. Once international regimes have been established, they develop their own self-interest as international institutions in whose maintenance other actors have an interest too, even in the event that the initial hegemonic power declines. As a result, *non-hegemonic* or *post-hegemonic* cooperation may emerge. A regional perspective on the patterns of cooperation in the aftermath of the uprisings highlights not only the ongoing weakness of existing regional organizations such as the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council but also the continuing dynamics of fractionalization. While both the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council continue to exist, they are either in stasis or have been strategically hijacked by the relevant hegemons. The emerging sub-regional

coalitions appear to be structured along the lines of common enemies rather than according to mutual regional interests and common benefits. A stage of non-hegemonic cooperation has yet to be reached in the Middle East and North Africa, as the recurrence of violent external state interventionism in Libya, Yemen, and especially Syria since 2011 has clearly demonstrated. Although much anecdotal evidence points to the empirical relevance of new forms of cooperation among surviving authoritarian regimes – for instance, in the realm of state security and terrorism – the literature still lacks a systematic analysis of the drivers and pitfalls of these newest developments (for a study on Iran’s Syria policy cf. Terrill 2015).

A central challenge in developing a new perspective on transnational diffusion and cooperation in the Middle East and North Africa remains whether a change in behavior, policy, or institutional setup can be traced to concrete empirical evidence – either direct observations or interpretations of them. Tracing this causality would allow us to consider transnational similarities as more than just “similar responses to similar conditions.” The papers in this series represent an outstandingly rich collection of attempts in this regard, looking at the Middle East from the perspective of transnational processes. These contributions not only point out relevant and important events of positive diffusion and cooperation, but some also highlight important negative findings that enable us to better understand the limitations of our concepts.

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The Political Ecology of Authoritarian Learning

Steven Heydemann, Janet W. Ketcham Chair, Middle East Studies, Smith College

Since mass protests first broke out in the Middle East in late 2010, authoritarian regimes in the Arab world have demonstrated significant resilience. Not all have survived. Some are engulfed in violent conflict. Yet in a majority of cases, the uprisings of 2011 failed to bring about either the breakdown of authoritarian regimes or transitions to some form of post-authoritarian governance. Among scholars of Arab politics – even those who view it as too soon to declare that the uprisings have failed – there is a widely shared consensus that among their many effects the “resurgence of the security state” and the reconsolidation of authoritarian governance rank among the most important and consequential for the future of the region (Lynch 2016; POMEPS 2015).

Despite this consensus, the resurgence of authoritarian governance in the Arab world has done little to resolve debates about the causes of authoritarian resilience. What enabled most authoritarian regimes in the region to survive sustained, large-scale anti-regime uprisings? Explanations for the capacity of regimes to contain, suppress, or prevent mass protests have varied widely. They have focused on the effects of regime type, the redistributive capacity of regimes, civil-military relations, the presence of cross-cutting coalitions, levels of sectarian diversity, and the extent of institutionalization among security sectors.

In addition, and of particular interest in assessing regime resilience, scholars have shown growing interest in the effects of authoritarian learning and transnational dissemination of authoritarian practices on the survival of Arab regimes (Bank and Edel 2015; Patel, Bunce, and Wolchik 2014; Heydemann and Leenders 2014). Extending the insights of literatures on the adaptive or recombinant qualities of authoritarian regimes (Heydemann and Leenders 2013), and building on comparative lessons drawn from authoritarian responses to the “color revolutions” and regime efforts to counter Western-backed

democracy promotion, research programs on authoritarian learning and dissemination have begun to explore the forms, content, and mechanisms through which authoritarian regimes in the Arab Middle East upgrade their governance practices in the face of new challenges.

Such processes have been highly visible among Arab regimes, where we see longstanding evidence of convergence in the tactics and strategies they have adopted to sustain themselves (Heydemann 2007). They have been widely characterized as central to the governance repertoires that regimes developed to mitigate the effects of the 2011 uprisings. Yet even as this literature has grown, and even as the causal effects of learning and dissemination are becoming increasingly apparent, the processes through which they take place, and the causal relationships between dissemination, learning, and resilience, remain understudied and under-theorized.¹

In particular, important efforts to identify and trace the causal pathways through which international factors reshape regime practices have outpaced attempts to untangle how imported ideas become integrated into the standard operating procedures of authoritarian institutions. Researchers have worked to identify the mechanisms that facilitate dissemination – including emulation, appropriation, socialization, and inter-elite cooperation among authoritarian epistemic networks (Heydemann 2009; Xiaoyu 2012; Levitsky 2005) – and to pinpoint distinctive domains in which learning leads to policy change (Bank and Edel 2015). But how these mechanisms generate learning—that is, lead to durable and meaningful changes in the behavior of actors and institutions responsible for the maintenance of

1 In this working memo, I distinguish between learning and dissemination, on one hand, and authoritarian cooperation, on the other hand (Erdmann, Bank, and Hoffmann 2013). Not all cooperation involves learning and not all learning requires cooperation. Cooperation may facilitate learning and dissemination, but is not necessary for them to occur. See also footnote 3.

authoritarian regimes—remains murky.²

We have established a number of plausible mechanisms of dissemination. We see evidence of their impact on governance practices. But how they actually work is less clear (Erdmann et al 2013, 7).³ The links between dissemination and the institutionalization of learning are too often underdeveloped.⁴

This gap is evident in how dissemination and learning have been approached in research on authoritarianism in the Arab Middle East. Claims about the role of these processes in the maintenance of authoritarian regimes has relied heavily on observed shifts in regime behavior during periods of stress (Bank and Edelman 2015). Relevant shifts seem to include those that meet one or more of three criteria:

(1) they appear to express conscious and intentional imitation in governance practices (Bunce and Wolchik 2006);

(2) they reflect behavioral changes among key regime actors that are triggered by personal experiences (Bermeo 1992; Levy 1994 in Bank and Edel 2015);

2 Literatures on democratic learning exhibit a similar gap. In Bermeo's (1992) work, for example, learning is presented as a process that operates at the level of individual actors. Experience affects the attitudes and beliefs of influential actors, changing their views about the desirability of democracy. In response, actors behave differently and, through their actions, affect outcomes. For durable systemic change to occur, however, individual preferences have to be institutionalized, routinized, and integrated into both bureaucratic processes and the attitudes and beliefs of publics at large.

3 This concern does not apply to all instances of dissemination and learning. In some cases, the causal mechanisms linking dissemination to outcomes are explicit and visible. These include the dissemination of authoritarian practices through direct cooperation among governments, where we can identify the agents who transfer knowledge across borders in defined contexts for defined purposes. Iran's involvement in upgrading the skills and competence of Syrian loyalist militias and other arms of the Assad regime's security apparatus, and in restructuring security forces to undertake roles for which they were not previously equipped – notably urban warfare – is a prominent example of visible and traceable modes of authoritarian dissemination and learning through formal, inter-regime cooperation.

4 One of the effects of this gap is that we have fewer tools with which to explain why dissemination and learning do not occur in some instances when authoritarian regimes face challenges for which tested and effective responses exist in global repertoires of authoritarian governance, or why learning sometimes fails (Bank and Edel 2015).

(3) they increase convergence in governance practices among authoritarian regimes.

These criteria are useful. They take into account that dissemination is likely to increase the extent to which authoritarian regimes adopt similar governance repertoires to address similar threats and challenges. They also acknowledge that learning can lead to innovations, hybrid practices, or contextually-specific adaptations. However, these criteria do not address how newly-learned practices become institutionalized within authoritarian systems of rule to become standard operating procedures.

This working memo, using the related concepts of recombinant authoritarianism and the political ecology of authoritarian learning, is a preliminary and partial effort to address this missing link. It relies heavily but not exclusively on experiences of the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad in the period since the start of the Syrian uprising in March 2011. It uses these concepts to highlight the importance of principal-agent dynamics in authoritarian learning. It goes on to suggest that further research on principal-agent relations – a surprisingly neglected aspect of the learning literature – is needed to understand patterns and variation in authoritarian dissemination and learning. Through a focus on principle-agent relations, it sheds tentative light on why the top-down consolidation or institutionalization of new governance practices seems to occur more easily in some organizational domains than others, and varies across cases as well.

Dissemination and the Institutionalization of Learned Practices

For some scholars of authoritarianism (not only in the Arab Middle East), the processes through which governance practices become institutionalized are obvious and uninteresting. In authoritarian regimes decision authority is tightly held by a small number of individuals who rule by fiat, ruthlessly ensure compliance, and cultivate risk averse organizational cultures. Under authoritarianism, in other words, principal-agent problems are minimized. The introduction of new and expanded

coercive practices in Syria's security sector since 2011 serves to illustrate this view of authoritarian learning.

Coercive strategies of compliance as a means to overcome resistance to the adoption of controversial modes of repression and violence are evident in two recent accounts of the practices adopted by the Assad regime to respond to an emergent uprising in the city of Deir al-Zour located near Syria's eastern border with Iraq (Borger 2015; Taub 2016). Regime documents acquired by the Commission for International Justice and Accountability (CIJA) provide unprecedented insight into processes of decision making and the downward dissemination of orders concerning the methods to be used in repressing protests. According to these documents, local agents of the regime's security apparatus fed information concerning protest activities upward to a high-level security committee, the Central Crisis Management Cell (CCMC), constituted of the very top tier of trusted regime officials. The CCMC, in turn, oversaw the work of the National Security Bureau (NSB), an agency responsible for coordinating four internal security organizations as well as the Ba`th Party security apparatus, including their regional and local security committees.

As protests escalated in Deir al-Zour during the spring of 2011, the CCMC instructed local security forces to increase their use of torture, expand the range and intensity of torture techniques used against detainees, and increase the numbers of detainees by lowering the threshold of behavior warranting detention. In at least one documented case, a local security official criticized these procedural changes, expressing concern about the brutality with which new measures were being implemented. Such criticism was quickly suppressed, however, and local security forces shortly integrated and routinized new coercive procedures. Emphasizing the effects of an authoritarian bureaucratic culture on learning, the founder of the CIJA describes the Syrian security apparatus as an organizational context favoring the rapid dissemination and integration of new practices:

"It [the internal security apparatus] is highly bureaucratized . . . It generates an awful lot of paper, because it is a culture

in which decision-making by subordinates is implicitly discouraged, so people are forever reporting upwards, trying to get others to take responsibility for decision making, and covering their ass. . ." (Borger 2015).

A similar account of coercive compliance in the regime's security sector has been reported within the Syrian air force (SyAAF). According to a military analyst, the Assad regime issued orders to helicopter pilots to target civilians:

"Through 2012, reports began to circulate that the regime in Damascus had ordered all SyAAF squadron commanders to bomb civilians in insurgent-controlled areas. Damascus instructed all commanding officers at first, and then all officers in each operational unit, to acknowledge the order with their signatures.

Although a majority of SyAAF pilots at that time were Alawite – there were by then very few Christians, Druze and Sunnis left with the service – the order met with strong dissent. Pilots who refused to obey the order disappeared. A few reappeared after a week or two in prison, where torture was not uncommon. Others were never seen again."⁵

In both instances, the regime's leadership used repression to overcome non-compliance with new rules within its security sector. Resistance to the adoption of new techniques was simply crushed. These cases highlight the absence of barriers to dissemination and the institutionalization of new practices in specific organizational contexts and under exceptional circumstances. When the institutionalization of new practices requires internal adaptations of the state bureaucracy, when it occurs within the most hierarchic of organizations – the security sector – when it concerns governance practices that are seen as necessary to ensure the survival of a regime, and when the costs of non-

5 Tom Cooper, "The Hind Gunship Is One of Syria's Worst Terror Weapons: Aging Helicopters Attack Indiscriminately." <https://warisboring.com/the-hind-gunship-is-one-of-syrias-worst-terror-weapons-a590dff95a4e#.tu6vq8jap>

compliance by agents are seen by rulers as unacceptably high, the effectiveness of dissemination is likely and predictable. Adherence to new procedures may not be complete. Some agents will continue to find ways to dissent – passive resistance exists within even the most hierarchic and coercive institutions – but overall, coercive learning can, in some cases, eliminate principal-agent problems.

In other instances, however, when the consolidation of new rules or procedures is not only internal to a state institution but also requires the compliance of external actors, resolving principal-agent problems is more difficult and less predictable. Regime efforts to adapt the rules of economic governance and mitigate the impact of war on the Syrian economy have had decidedly mixed results. Regulations restricting the export of capital have not prevented capital flight. In 2011, the imposition of new rules restricting imports was resisted by business actors and quickly rescinded. More recently, subsidy cuts have led to protests in areas under regime control.

These examples illustrate the variation in the consolidation of learning among different organization or sectoral domains. Where the institutionalization of new practices requires the compliance of a large and diverse set of agents, where incentives for non-compliance are high and the costs less severe, and where coercive means for securing compliance themselves involve high costs, even an authoritarian regime in the midst of economic collapse may find it challenging to resolve principal-agent problems and secure the institutionalization of new governance practices.

Institutionalized Resistance to Learning

A second, contrasting view of authoritarian regimes in the Arab Middle East leads to very different conclusions about the ability of political leaders to disseminate and institutionalize new governance practices. From this perspective, possibilities for authoritarian learning are highly constrained. Regimes in the Arab Middle East are viewed as sclerotic, resistant to change, and locked into established practices by corrupt, clientalist organizational

cultures that impede innovation and undermine the capacity of rulers to ensure the compliance of subordinates. This view posits that authoritarianism, with its lack of transparency and accountability, exacerbates principal-agent problems and works against processes of dissemination and learning.

The downward causal links needed to institutionalize and routinize new practices are present, but weak and fragmented. This perspective is perhaps most widely expressed in analyses of elite tensions that marked Egypt's uprising from 2011-2013. When accounting for the struggles and turmoil that led to the overthrow of President Morsi in July 2013, assessments have highlighted the institutional incoherence of the Egyptian state, the diffusion of authority and control, and the ominous role of "the deep state" to explain the difficulties elected officials encountered in their efforts to implement Islamist-oriented projects of political reform, respond to popular demands for political change, and restore economic stability. As a prominent Jordanian economist observed:

"[Salafist] FJP party leaders contend that deep state networks are an obstacle to their sovereignty, while other political camps argue that the Brotherhood's influence is becoming more pronounced in state institutions. Some groups also claim that there is no impetus to improve the performance of public institutions, to render them more responsive to the demands of the citizenry, and to address the problems the system faces . . .

Once again, the key sources of weakness in the Egyptian economy must be pinpointed. Does weakness stem from institutions so fragile that they are incapable of improvement, irrespective of who is in power? In a political framework that gives control of critical institutions to the ruling party or the covert resistance to this control? Egypt lacks institutions that may facilitate dialogue on this question, while the rival groups continue to hold each other responsible for the current situation" (Saif 2013).

What Saif describes as a rigid state with fragile, ineffective institutions – meaning, institutions in which agents can

prevent principals from disseminating and consolidating new governance practices – is consistent with the view of authoritarianism in the Arab Middle East as sclerotic and resistant to change, with leaders who can rule but not govern. Following his coup against Morsi, however, General and then President Sisi succeeded in expanding and institutionalizing a broad repertoire of repressive measures that build on and significantly enhance prior practices. In responding to the threat mass politics posed to the regime, Sisi was able to achieve what Morsi could not: to mobilize the repressive, regulatory, and legislative institutions of the state in a large-scale process of authoritarian adaptation. This was accomplished, in part, through the use of coercive means to ensure compliance among agents within the state apparatus. It also mattered that Sisi was able to frame the consolidation of new practices as necessary for the survival of both state and society, and as an expression of the state's role as guarantor of security and stability. More broadly, however, the contrast between Sisi and Morsi underscores the difficulty of generalizing about processes of learning and dissemination within authoritarian regimes in the Arab Middle East.

Both approaches – perspectives that view authoritarianism as either a source of principal-agent problems or as their solution – offer important insights into learning dynamics within authoritarian regimes. Both capture significant aspects of the organizational cultures that prevail in authoritarian regimes in the Arab Middle East. Yet neither is wholly complete or entirely satisfactory. Authoritarian regimes in the Middle East vary along any number of dimensions – regime type, resource base, demographic diversity, and state capacity. Despite these differences, however, Arab regimes cannot easily be classified as either highly centralized with tightly-coupled institutional structures that facilitate dissemination and learning or highly decentralized with loosely-coupled structures that impede diffusion and learning.

Both sets of attributes are present in every Arab regime. In fact, the “learning profiles” of Arab regimes may exhibit higher levels of “within regime” variation than of “cross

regime” variation. Thus, even as documents surface revealing how norms of deference and compliance in Syria's security sector supported the rapid dissemination of shifts in coercive practices, we find numerous accounts of the erosion of regime authority and the rise of autonomous economic and military actors in regime-held areas of the country. Even as Egypt's deep state frustrates the ambitions of the Muslim Brotherhood, we find the rapid dissemination and adoption of governance practices that have intensified internal repression of the media, civil society, and Islamist opposition movements since 2013 – tactics evident to differing degrees in virtually every authoritarian regime that survived the 2011 uprisings.

Authoritarian Ecologies and the Challenge of Learning

If authoritarian regimes are inconsistent and uneven in their capacity to institutionalize new ideas and practices, how can we account for the impact of dissemination and learning on governance or on authoritarian resilience? Two related concepts might prove useful in attempts to theorize processes of authoritarian dissemination and learning under such conditions. One is the notion of recombinant authoritarianism, which defines authoritarian regimes as “systems of rule that possess the capacity to reorder and reconfigure existing instruments and strategies of governance, to reshape and recombine existing institutional, discursive, and regulatory arrangements to create recognizable but nonetheless distinctive solutions to shifting configurations of challenges” (Heydemann and Leenders 2013, 7). The second, intended to provide the empirical foundations needed to test claims concerning the recombinant capacity of authoritarian regimes, is based on mapping the political ecologies of regimes to identify (1) when, within what domains, and under what conditions they exhibit the attributes of either tightly-coupled systems in which principal-agent problems are minor, or loosely-coupled systems in which principal-agent problems obstruct dissemination and learning; (2) whether and under what conditions rulers are able to change the balance of attributes within distinct domains of governance, moving along a spectrum from tightly-coupled to loosely-coupled; and (3) the conditions under

which dissemination and learning encounter resistance, are ineffective, or fail to become institutionalized and routinized within regimes.

The notion of a political ecology is important in this respect in its implication that regimes are not fixed at one point on this spectrum (and, indeed, may occupy more than one point at any given time). Yet it should also be used with caution to avoid the inference that dissemination and learning can somehow be seen as comparable to natural evolution. With this caution in mind, these two concepts offer a framework for both theorizing dissemination and learning and testing empirically claims concerning their effects on authoritarian resilience. As this memo has suggested, the path forward in the development of such a framework lies in mapping the political ecologies of authoritarian governance in the Arab Middle East: disaggregating processes of learning and dissemination to unpack how and under what conditions governance practices in distinct domains are imported, disseminated internally, and institutionalized. Such a framework, moreover, requires a conception of authoritarianism as a recombinant system of rule, in which the potential for adaptation is universally present but unequally distributed, and where the capacity of regimes to manage principal-agent relations stands out as a key indicator of how effectively they institutionalize new governance practices in specific organizational contexts. Further research along these lines will, I believe, help bridge the empirical and theoretical gaps that now limit our understanding of how dissemination influences processes of authoritarian learning in the Arab Middle East.

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Arab Regimes' International Linkages and Authoritarian Learning: Toward an Ethnography of Counter-Revolutionary Bricolage

Reinoud Leenders, King's College London

The resilience of authoritarian rule throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has alerted scholars to what intuitively may appear to be self-evident: Arab autocrats do not operate in an international vacuum but variously draw on their external environments to mobilize resources and expertise, learn from successes and failures, adjust to changes, and respond to the challenges of mass mobilization and –increasingly – insurgencies. Some of the emerging literature on the MENA's authoritarian diffusion has focused on “authoritarian learning.” Within this niche researchers centered their attention on “emulation.” They did so primarily in an attempt to read regime incumbents' calculations and calibrations as they watched early counter-revolutionary responses in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, absorbed lessons, and developed their own strategies. More generally, the literature on international dimensions of authoritarian governance rewardingly adopted some of the concepts and starting points of democratic diffusion approaches to explore the regional and international dimensions of *authoritarian* diffusion.

Arguably, it is time that we stand Levitsky and Way's main hypothesis about “international linkages and democratization”¹ on its head and ask whether and how the scope and density of their international linkages helped Arab authoritarian incumbents in their counter-revolutionary strategies. First, such international linkages are understood to comprise Arab regime incumbents' ties to other authoritarian regimes both within the region and beyond. Accordingly, the proposed perspective promises to shed some light on the rather muddled and contested concept of “autocracy promotion.” By no longer guessing at the intentions of “black knights” (authoritarian regimes purposely promoting autocratic governance elsewhere) we shift our research to observable ties among authoritarians

and their relevance to regime maintenance. At the same time, a focus on Arab regimes' international linkages informed by an ethnographic research agenda compels us to transcend assumptions about the overriding effects of geographical and/or political proximity, which appear to make more sense when it comes to intra-authoritarian emulation. By taking authoritarian regimes' global linkages seriously, we challenge the morally gratifying but inaccurate narrative of dictators patting each other on their backs while, in contrast, links to Western democracies are primarily viewed as raising the costs of authoritarianism.

International linkages, authoritarian learning and bricolage

To start framing the study of international ties that arguably help inform authoritarian governance, I suggest borrowing Levitsky and Way's concept of “international linkages” but broadening it to include authoritarian regimes' ties to both Western democratic and (regional) authoritarian countries. This strips the concept from its expected democratizing significance, leaving us to define international linkages as “the density of ties (economic, political, diplomatic, social, and organizational) and cross-border flows (of capital, goods and services, people, and information) among particular countries [...]”² Furthermore, we are ultimately interested in the extent to which such international linkages – encompassing “the myriad networks of interdependence that connect individual polities”³ – provide a site or transmission belt for authoritarian learning. The latter is preliminarily understood here to refer to international and transnational interactions enabling the exchange or transfer of knowledge, ideas, insights, models, expertise, skills and/or technology that can be used at the service of a regime's

1 Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*, Cambridge University Press (2010).

2 Ibid., 43.

3 Ibid.

efforts to adjust, enhance or optimize authoritarian governance. More specifically, at times of potential protest diffusion, like during the Arab uprisings and their aftermath, such learning may be assumed to help regimes build “autocratic firewalls.”

Finally – and to both acknowledge and capture the eclectic qualities of authoritarian learning in a world where few present themselves as being in the business of ‘autocracy promotion’ – I propose adding the notion of counter-revolutionary bricolage. This term inverts Selbin’s “revolutionary bricolage,” which denotes mass movements’ selective borrowing from and appropriating a variety of repertoires and registers of contention worldwide.⁴ Not so different from their revolutionary contenders, authoritarian regimes are, from this perspective, perusing their international linkages to cobble together counter-revolutionary policies, strategies and tactics from a variety of repertoires or tested methods of governance. I hypothesize that regime incumbents reassemble these elements in adjusted forms for local use as they seek effective measures to counter challenges to their rule.

Proximate linkages

Arab regimes’ proximate linkages denote geographically close ties with neighboring countries and, in terms of regime type, relations with authoritarian regimes within and beyond the region. Given the region’s high concentration of authoritarian regimes, geographically and politically proximate linkages largely overlap. Following the Arab uprisings, there have been some marked changes in how regime incumbents are tied to each other in ways that may have enabled or encouraged authoritarian learning.

Firstly, regional security cooperation especially between the Gulf states and Arab monarchies received a considerable boost. This involved increased linkages – comprising authoritarian incumbents, army and security personnel, and defense specialists – among Saudi Arabia,

the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, expanding to the Jordanian and Moroccan monarchies after the latter were invited to join the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in September 2011. An exchange of security personnel and increased regional outlook of the UAE’s and Jordan’s defense colleges and military training facilities are of particular relevance in this context. While cast in terms of anti-terrorism and “national security” more broadly, it seems reasonable to assume that such linkages are spawned and reinforced to allow newly acquired skills and knowledge in these fields to feed into regime maintenance efforts.

Secondly, authoritarian regimes strengthened their bilateral linkages, foremost Syria and Iran, to directly counter insurgencies to the extent that their political and security apparatus virtually merged. Ensuing political and material linkages between the two regimes incorporated a vital transfer of knowledge, technologies and skills, further enabling the Syrian regime to fight off steep challenges at many fronts. Countering mass protests, cyber policing, military training and advice on counter-insurgency tactics are among the numerous fields in which Iranian-Syrian linkages flourished.

Thirdly, Arab regimes have built linkages to non-state actors with expertise and skills in irregular warfare, anti-terrorism operations and security techniques more generally. In the Gulf countries and Jordan this is particularly apparent in the proliferation of private military and security companies (PMSCs) offering a host of services, including expertise and advice on anti-terrorism operations, surveillance, cyber technology, and the protection of critical infrastructure. Dubai has become a hub for such companies setting up their headquarters there with the clear intention to serve clients throughout the region. Jordan, too, counts several PMSCs that appear to advise governments on a host of security techniques and technologies that could directly feed into authoritarian learning. In Syria it has been primarily Hezbollah that – in addition to providing skilled and well-trained manpower for the regime’s military campaigns – has been offering tactical advice to the regime and training to both the

⁴ Eric Selbin, *Revolution, Rebellion, Resistance: The Power of History*, Zed Books (2010), 40-41.

regular armed forces and pro-regime militias.

Linkages to authoritarian regimes beyond the region have also expanded considerably, primarily through the growing interventionism of Russia and its considerable support to the Syrian regime. Yet beyond Russia's material and diplomatic support there is little evidence of Russian advice and expertise informing or helping the Syrian regime's impressive array of counter-revolutionary tactics and strategies at home. Indeed, some of the advice reportedly given by the Russian military in Syria – such as dissolving the NDF and instead relying on regular forces – have not been heeded, perhaps because of the greater leverage of the Iranians who heavily invested in the NDF.⁵ Framed in Levitsky and Way's terminology, the intense cooperation between Syria and Russia appears to be a rare case of "high linkage-low leverage," made all the more extraordinary given the Russians' vital military support to the regime.

Beyond Syria, Russia's post-2011 linkages to authoritarian Arab states and authoritarian BRICS states' ties to the region, seem more limited. Another exception may develop in relation to Russia's posturing toward Egypt's General Abdel Fattah al-Sissi, as the two countries signed a \$2 billion arms deal in February 2014 and held joint naval exercises in the Mediterranean Sea a year later. However, here too the Russian move does not seem to be part of an elaborate effort of "autocracy promotion" immersed in tightening networks of authoritarian learning; rather it appears to be motivated by the Egyptian regime signaling to the United States that it can circumvent human rights conditions placed on the delivery of military hardware and the Russians seizing an opportunity to contest U.S. hegemony and find customers in the Middle East for its arms industry.

Ties to the West

Accompanying a massive transfer of Western military hardware and technology to the MENA are intense

5 Ibrahim Hamidi, "Russian intervention urges to dismantle 'defence forces,'" *Al-Hayat*, 11 October 2015 (in Arabic). <http://www.alhayat.com/Articles/11536041>

linkages with the West involving military and security instructors, trainers, maintenance engineers, and advisors. Much of such programs and exchanges are framed in terms of supporting allies' legitimate "national security" concerns and "anti-terrorism" efforts. Often curricula taught to Arab students explicitly incorporates democracy, human rights promotion, peace-keeping, and "security sector reform." Yet one may reasonably suspect that the dual use of such deep linkages, in addition to their lacking transparency, make this transfer of military technology, knowledge and experience a rich source for authoritarian learning.

Contrary to initial expectations, linkages connecting Western and Arab intelligence seem to be as robust as ever five years after the Arab uprisings, and both U.S. and European policymakers are striving to make them ever stronger. Little is known about what these intimate Western dealings with Arab intelligence agencies do to the latter, especially whether it exposed them to a transfer of Western skills, techniques and expertise in tracing suspects, surveillance and interrogation and whether such acquired capabilities fed into enhanced techniques of authoritarian governance more generally. The assumption that it had such effects seems plausible enough to investigate further.

Following their intense use by U.S. forces in Iraq, a large number of Western PMSCs established their regional headquarters in Dubai in a bid to reach new clients. The region's instability and armed conflicts after 2011 provided new impetus. For instance, Erik Prince, the founder of Blackwater (now renamed Academi), has provided advice and personnel with the explicit aim of securing regime incumbents in the UAE, Jordan and Libya.⁶ Western PMSCs in Dubai have offered their clients the services of "embedded staff" in security agencies, highly skilled, experienced and often retired military, security and police

6 Mark Mazzetti and Emily B. Hager, "Secret Desert Force Set up by Blackwater's Founder," *The New York Times*, 14 May 2011; Matthew Cole and Jeremy Scahill, "Erik Prince in the Hot Seat," *The Intercept*, 24 March 2016. <https://theintercept.com/2016/03/24/blackwater-founder-erik-prince-under-federal-investigation/>; Jeremy Scahill, *Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army*, Profile Books (2011).

officers. Western security and police experts have also been hired in their personal capacities in Bahrain and Abu Dhabi. The region's sprouting defense and security colleges, including Abu Dhabi's National Defense College, are almost entirely staffed by ex-U.S. military.

Western firms offer their MENA clients products, services and support in surveillance and policing techniques – ranging from CCTV and phone hacking devices, to biometric authentication technology – in addition to prison and riot police tools and gear that are often subjected to EU export bans.⁷ West-European and North American companies specializing in “lawful interception” software supplied, advised and supported most Arab regimes' efforts to survey, control and manipulate the internet, and to spy on its local users.

If the Arab uprisings were at least partly informed by grievances over widespread regime corruption and cronyism, Arab authoritarian incumbents' response appears to have been to hide, launder and secure their ill-gotten wealth in even more elaborate ways. Western financial institutions sold products to and advised Arab authoritarian incumbents in setting up a myriad of shell and front companies and built a chain of subsidiaries in (offshore) jurisdictions worldwide to counter identification of their ultimate owner. The Panama Papers – leaked documents of Panama-based Mossack Fonseca legal firm – already showed how several Arab regime incumbents are tied to Western financial institutions. Their full disclosure is likely to offer a wealth of information on the international financial linkages of Arab authoritarian regimes and how these ties assist them to hide their wealth.

Before 2011, Western support for “reform” in the region rarely had the desired result of generating significant democratic change and, from a democratization perspective, it could even be considered as counter-productive. More often than not, reform assistance provided regimes with new cooptation techniques to

replace those left obsolete by retrenching states. In the midst of the Arab uprisings, the U.S. and the European Union promised to reconsider their reform-based aid to authoritarian regimes. Yet with security concerns over terrorism and refugee flows crowding out stated sympathies with protestors' demands, the reform narrative soon became acceptable again. Western reform assistance resumed to Arab countries where regime incumbents have no intention to embark on meaningful reforms. Once again, “dancing with wolves”⁸ inexorably causes Western donors in the post-revolutionary MENA to provide authoritarian “reformers” with the linkages and resources that help them to entrench their power.

An ethnography of counter-revolutionary bricolage

Arab authoritarian regimes appear to have built and nurtured a web of international linkages allowing for an exchange or transfer of knowledge, ideas, insights, models, expertise, skills and/or technology directly relevant to authoritarian governance. These linkages could be viewed as informing authoritarian learning and, in turn, they may feed into regime strategies to adjust to and overcome steep challenges to their rule. Strikingly, Arab regimes have established dense linkages with agents in the region and beyond. They also do not appear to be particularly choosy when drawing on these linkages whether to other authoritarian regimes or to democratic countries. Indeed, authoritarian incumbents appear to engage in bricolage at a truly global scale, utilizing various often-contradictory repertoires or tested methods of repression and cooptation. Put differently, Arab regimes' “recombinant authoritarianism”⁹ has a strong international dimension. It also appears that the study of linkages between authoritarian regimes, although imperative, should not

7 Omega Research Foundation and Amnesty International, “Why the EU Should Ban the Commercial Marketing and Promotion of Inhumane Policing and Prison Equipment,” 9 May 2016.

8 Oliver Schlumberger, “Dancing with Wolves: Dilemmas of Democracy Promotion in Authoritarian Contexts,” in: Dietrich Jung (ed), *Democratization and Development: New Political Strategies for the Middle East*, Palgrave Macmillan (2006), 33-60.

9 Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders, “Authoritarian Governance in Syria and Iran: Challenged, Reconfiguring, and Resilient,” in: Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders (eds), *Middle East Authoritarianisms: Governance, Contestation, and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran*, Stanford University Press (2013), 7.

be privileged, or perhaps not even be separately pursued, In fact, a strong case could be made for the study of Arab regimes' linkages to the democratic West as being of equal or, in some cases, even greater importance to authoritarian learning. Furthermore, regimes' linkages to democratic and authoritarian countries are at times mutually reinforcing. Also noteworthy is that Arab regimes' international linkages appear to increasingly comprise numerous non-state actors, ranging from Hezbollah, to Western PMSCs, to international banks. Arab regimes eagerly turn to them whenever needs and opportunities arise to strengthen authoritarian rule at home.

The international linkages that feed into regime strategies and authoritarian governance can be viewed as sites for ethnographic research on authoritarian bricolage. As Levitsky and Way observe, "[m]any international effects that are commonly described as 'global' are, in fact, rooted in concrete ties – networks; organizations, and flows of people, information, and resources – among states."¹⁰ In this context, it may be fruitful to consult anthropologists who in response to globalization developed methodologies of "multi-sited fieldwork" catered to the "study of phenomena dispersed across borders and articulated in flexible networks."¹¹ For our purposes, the finely-grained nature of such an ethnographic inquiry would help to establish the exact learning effects enabled by regimes' international linkages, distinguish them from other forms of authoritarian diffusion, and

explore how these effects were translated in concrete policy adaptation. It may also be a fruitful starting point to explore the conception, transfer and exchange of values and norms that may also be suspected to inform authoritarian learning. By viewing Arab regimes' international linkages as constituting an "authoritarian epistemic community,"¹² an ethnography of authoritarian learning could develop its own approach to "socialization," borrowing from Europeanization studies and, perhaps more pertinently, criminology.

Some may object that an ethnography of authoritarian linkages and learning will be seriously hampered by lack of access to the shady and secretive sites where knowledge and values relevant to authoritarian governance are likely to be produced and shared. In some cases this indeed will impose serious challenges. Yet agents maneuvering in many of the proposed sites for ethnographic research have their own imperatives to present themselves to the outside world, giving the researcher a way to approach informants. Such self-presentations often reside in the "dual use" or Janus-faced nature of many of the linkages discussed, ranging from "anti-terrorism" cooperation, the imperative of "intelligence sharing," and "lawful interception" software, to "reform" more generally. Even the most contentious linkages among authoritarian incumbents are no longer clouded in total secrecy, as they too feel compelled to tell the world that they have a cause worth fighting – and linking up – for.¹³

10 Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, 44.

11 Finn Stepputat and Jessica Larsen, "Global Political Ethnography: A Methodological Approach to Studying Global Policy Regimes," DIIS Working Paper, 2015, 6. <https://www.econstor.eu/dspace/bitstream/10419/122296/1/81845234X.pdf>

12 Thanks to Steven Heydemann for suggesting the term.

13 See e.g.: Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, "General Qasem Soleimani: Iran's Rising Star," BBC News, 6 March 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27883162>.

Regional and international diffusion and firewalls (excerpt)

Etel Solingen, University of California, Irvine

Studies on international and transnational diffusion found that regional neighborhood effects have dominated democratic transitions in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East far more so than global ones. One mechanism explaining why democratic transitions tend to cluster within regions focuses on the role of pivotal states. In the post-communist world, such states shared an unusual combination of relatively large and organized opposition movements; enduring authoritarians which could not defeat popular mobilizations; geopolitical importance; similar political economies across neighboring states; and powerful international support for incumbents and opposition, revealing tolerance for regime change (Patel and Bunce 2012). Those conditions in pivotal states signaled to neighbors the potential for further diffusion of democracy. Another mechanism for diffusion of color revolutions was emulation of elite-defection and elite-learning models (Mekouar 2014).

The 2011 Middle East contagion brings to relief the complexity entailed in the study of diffusion, with wide-ranging debates over who the main agents were, what causal mechanisms dominated (bread prices, learning, emulation, and identity, inter alia), the varying mix of firewalls and conductivity in the relevant medium,¹ and spatial and temporal patterns (direction of contagion, duration of gestation). While the role of social media is often cited as a core transmission belt, the most affected states were less endowed in such media than those that were less affected by regional diffusion. Indeed recent work found new media not to have played a significant role in either coalescing collective action within countries or underpinning diffusion regionally. However, that type of media would have been more likely to spread information beyond the region than within it. Arab uprisings hailed

from Tunisia to Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Syria. Higher firewalls in Iran, Algeria, and the GCC among others blocked further diffusion. Even assuming primarily regional – rather than global – sources of diffusion for those upheavals, their effects leapt into both adjacent non-Arab states (including Israel’s 2011 protest movement) and into more remote regions, from sub-Saharan Africa to Myanmar, Malaysia, Chile, Wall Street, Frankfurt, and Russia, although with varying intensity.

The occurrence and diffusionary potential of the 2011 Arab uprisings may also have deep roots in the models of political survival adopted by different regimes in power over the preceding decades. I outlined earlier (Solingen 2007b) why a significant number of East Asian political-economy models (Taiwan, South Korea, Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and others) were able to re-invent themselves in democratic form, often through the model’s unintended effects rather than by design. I also outlined the domestic sources explaining how internationalizing political-economy models came to take root in that part of the world to begin with. But a more complete account of this process requires a better understanding of regional diffusionary mechanisms. Progressive diffusion of successful export-oriented models arguably predisposed successive East Asian regimes to adapt analogous models to local circumstances in Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, China, Indonesia, and Vietnam. This diffusion was famously captured initially by the “flying geese” metaphor, pointing to Japanese capital and technology as an agent of diffusion through foreign direct investment (FDI) and bank loans. The economic success of models adopted by Asian “tigers” and “dragons,” in turn, led to a pattern of outward but uneven region-to-region diffusion. Ruling coalitions from Turkey to Chile adapted components of East Asian models. Today’s Pacific Alliance in Latin America (Chile, Peru, Colombia, and Mexico) may well be another instance of such diffusion.

¹ On the utility of focusing on firewalls that increase or decrease a medium’s conductivity along the diffusion path; on the political agents that seek to reinforce or dismantle firewalls and the causal mechanisms through which they operate, see Solingen (2012).

By contrast, domestic firewalls – notably dominant coalitions in rigid, exhausted, and predatory states – explain the very limited diffusion of East Asian models into the Middle East. Deeply rooted in the inward-looking political economy described above, these regimes were slower to recognize the end of the brief, “easy,” period of economic expansion under import-substitution. They continued to spend heavily, particularly in the military and its sprawling entrepreneurial activities, leading to inflation, balance-of-payments crises, and further decline (Egypt wrote the manual; Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Pakistan the 7.0, 8.0 and 9.0 versions). Often protected by oil revenues or second-order transfers from oil-rich to oil-poor and other remittances, they responded to economic crises by “deepening” inward-looking models rather than replacing them. “Dutch disease” reinforced reluctance to change. Yet, counter to deterministic oil-curse (or religion-based) expectations, Malaysia and Indonesia were receptive to the regional diffusion of internationalizing models throughout East Asia.

Entrenched inward-looking models in the Middle East explain not only the resolute firewalls against extra-regional East Asian models. They also explain intra-regional firewalls in dominant Middle East states that worked to prevent internationalizing steps primarily through mechanisms of coercion and emulation as well as socialization. Nasserite and Ba’athist models – crucial agents of diffusion of inward-looking models – exerted forceful intervention in neighboring states. They threatened and subverted internationalizing efforts by small, resource-poor Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia. The latter, as well as Turkey and the Gulf, were able to partially stem those intrusions to different degrees.² Today it is quite clear what model is diffusing endemically over the carcasses of failed inward-looking states, including Syria and Iraq: extreme variants (Daesh et al.) of autarky-seeking movements.

**This excerpt was originally prepared for the International Relations and a new Middle East symposium. Read the full*

² See memo by Legrenzi (2015).

memo, “Transcending disciplinary divide/s: A comparative framework on the international relations of the Middle East” here:

<http://pomeps.org/2015/08/31/transcending-disciplinary-divides-a-comparative-framework-on-the-international-relations-of-the-middle-east/>

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What really made the Arab uprisings contagious?

Merouan Mekouar, York University

After the January 2011 Tunisian revolution, virtually every Arab capital city witnessed popular protest inspired by the Tunisian case. Throughout North Africa and the Middle East, pro-democracy activists coalesced in central city squares and called for political change and economic reform. Yet, despite the presence of similar political and economic grievances, the countries of the region experienced different degrees of revolutionary emulation. While localized acts of protest in Egypt, Libya and Bahrain quickly evolved into regime-shaking demonstrations, other cases of protest in Morocco and Algeria failed to grow into national movements and quickly fizzled within a few months.

In a paper published in the June 2014 issue of the *International Studies Review*, I argue that for localized acts of protest to take a national dimension, respected political personalities or groups need to be on board during the early acts of protest against the government. In order to make my argument, I use the large theoretical body of informational cascades and focus on four North African countries.

For informational cascade theorists such as Suzanne Lohmann, Timur Kuran, Bueno de Mesquita or Kricheli, Livne, and Magaloni, citizens living in authoritarian states face a major informational problem. Because the state controls access to local information and because people are afraid to voice their opinions of the regime, disgruntled citizens are largely cut-off from each other and are unable to evaluate the level of popular dissatisfaction with the authorities. An aggrieved citizen may be aware that close friends and family are unhappy with the regime, for instance, but he or she is unable to assess whether people in other parts of the country are also dissatisfied. Thus, before taking to the streets, disgruntled citizens need to receive a signal that large parts of the population are also unhappy with the regime and willing to mobilize against it. For Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer and Welsh, informational cascades occur when individuals receive new information that helps them update their beliefs and bandwagon around the actions of others.

In the early days of the Arab Spring in North Africa, respected political agents helped trigger informational

cascades (and subsequent mass mobilization) by solving the informational challenge citizens faced in some authoritarian countries. In Egypt and Libya, the visible and largely unexpected involvement of groups or personalities traditionally close to the regime (or usually tolerated by it) transformed relatively small, isolated acts of protests into national events and helped signal to the rest of the population the presence of major opportunity for contestation. In contrast, protests led by marginal groups in Morocco and Algeria were unable to convince the rest of the population that there was an opening for demonstration.

Following the Tunisian revolution, mobilization in Egypt in early 2011 was nourished by an unexpected coalition between old and new activists. While a number of groups and personalities had been mobilizing for years against Mubarak's regime, the unexpected involvement of new actors in the early protests alerted the rest of the population to the presence of a truly exceptional opportunity for contestation. In addition to traditionally vocal groups, such as al-Mahalla workers or dissident liberal parties, the protests that followed the Tunisian revolution were characterized by the unexpected involvement of youth, celebrities, or internationally respected figures. Many activists were from well-off families close to the regime, and their involvement brought exceptional visibility to the protests organized by the traditional political activists. The involvement of these new actors created a powerful informational cascade by giving the demonstrations the visibility and the respectability necessary to reach the rest of the population.

A very similar process occurred in neighboring Libya following the February 2011 Benghazi protests. While the city experienced popular protests in 2006 that were swiftly extinguished by the authorities, the 2011 protests were marked by the quick defections of a series of senior government officials and military leaders, some of whom were friends of Moammar Gaddafi. Their actions created a sense of exceptionality and helped the rest of the population realize that Libya was experiencing historic momentum. Within a few days, the defections broke the silence in the country and helped nourish a powerful informational cascade.

In Algeria, in contrast, demonstrations organized by the Coordination Nationale pour le Changement Démocratique (CNCD) in Oran and Algiers were unable to attract more than a few thousand sympathizers. The low turnout of the CNCD demonstrations was particularly puzzling in a country which experiences dozens, if not hundreds, of acts of protests every year. In the Algerian case, virtually all of the country's political and economic actors firmly stood in defense of the regime. With the exception of the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights and a number of small independent unions, all of the country's relevant political agents refused to join the early demonstrations so that the local acts of protest did not gain the visibility necessary to spark an informational cascade.

The situation was similar in Morocco where locally relevant political agents also refused to join the protests organized by the youth of the February 20 movement. While a coalition of youth, human rights activists and Islamists demanded economic and political reform, virtually all of the country's major personalities and institutional groups, including respected journalists and popular artists, refused to bandwagon on the protests. Not only did these actors refuse to join the demonstrations, they also worked to stop the process of revolutionary diffusion in the country. Religious leaders, former dissidents and respected writers called on their followers to support the monarchy. Even hip-hop artists helped stop popular mobilization. Don Bigg, one of Morocco's most recognizable singers, dismissed the country's pro-democracy activists by referring to them as a bunch of "brats" and "Ramadan eaters".

The comparison of North African countries during the Arab Spring shows that a wide sense of popular disgruntlement with the authorities is not enough to trigger mass social mobilization. Local political agents have the ability to kill or inflate local acts of protests. The calculations made by these agents are critical for the development of informational cascades and it is therefore necessary to study their motivations more in detail.

Convergence through Learning? Patterns of Exclusion During the Arab Uprisings

By Maria Josua, German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Hamburg

During the Arab uprisings, the mass demonstrations that took place in many countries triggered different reactions by incumbent elites towards protesters. Regime reactions ranged from concessions and reform promises to defamation, negative framing and repression. The initial benevolence towards demands deemed legitimate, such as socioeconomic grievances or government reshuffles, subsided over time and was replaced by “exclusive-repressive policies” (Heydemann 2015) in the countries that slipped into protracted violence. However, in resilient, so-called “moderate,” autocracies such as Morocco, Jordan and Algeria, a negative attitude towards protest movements and the transnational ties between them also gained traction. Was this convergence towards the increasing delegitimation of transnationalism generally and of protesters more specifically due to learning by state actors in these countries? Learning is one crucial mechanism leading to convergence (Gilardi 2014), which can originate either in historical experience or the observation of external actors.

I look at various facets of exclusion, understood as “the neglect or rejection of the demands of certain groups and/or disregard for or discrimination against their identity” (Josua 2016a: 7). In the context of the Arab uprisings, the specific focus lies on the delegitimation and exclusion of protesters and different societal groups. From the multitude of mechanisms, I focus on three examples: negative and/or ethnical framing of protesters; banning dual nationals from public office; and physical exclusion. What these strategies have in common is that they seek to confine transnational ties and stop diffusion effects of activism from states undergoing profound change. As the exact mechanisms leading to convergence are difficult to trace, I outline some common strategies that deserve further study, building on evidence from recent literature on authoritarian learning (Heydemann and Leenders 2014, Bank and Edel 2015). The cases considered here include

countries with a high degree of volatility, though most are resilient autocracies. This uncovers broader patterns that currently shape Arab politics and that might continue to do so over the next years.

Framing Protesters vs. The Good Citizen

Participants in mass protests of the Arab uprisings were targeted by a variety of exclusionary discourses seeking to discredit them. In most Arab countries, the dominance of state media and some degree of self-censorship helped enhance the frequency of such frames. Their aim was to deter risk-averse citizens who were unsure whether to join the protests.

Already in early 2011, beginning with Ben Ali in Tunisia, officials framed protesters as foreign infiltrators, trouble-makers, vandals or criminals in their discourse. An even blunter frame depicted all protesters as Islamists or even jihadists. Even in cases where protest mobilization was low, such as Jordan and Algeria, elites apparently felt the need to resort to these kinds of frames to delegitimize the protesters’ demands and to justify the security forces’ repressive actions.

Dehumanizing framing of protestors was employed infamously in Libya where it backfired and to a lesser degree in Syria (Heydemann and Leenders 2014: 82). Assad only once referred to conspiracies as germs then refrained from using this genocidal terminology (ibid.). Branding protesters as terrorists became the default strategy in Syria “to legitimate its use of force, demonize its opponents, and communicate to the West that it and the Assad regime shared a common foe” (ibid.). The anti-terrorism discourse neatly tied in with similar approaches in Western countries, where it symbolizes the ultimate justification for all measures sold as necessary, no matter who the group labeled “terrorist” actually is.

Related to the discourse about foreign influence, conspiracy theories loomed large, e.g. Yemen and Syria, where they were first brought up very prominently in Assad's March 2011 speech. Allegations centered around Western democracy promotion schemes that were pictured as attacks on Arab states. Beyond the West, other enemies were suspected of meddling with domestic politics. Algeria probably even tried to create its own foreign conspiracy. An anonymous call for an uprising on 17 September 2011 was set up on Facebook, which appeared to have been faked. Also because it had no relation to domestic movements and political protests had long subsided, nobody followed it. The Minister of Interior was eager to blame "foreign parties related to the Zionist entity" in the newspaper *Ennahar* as the ultimate delegitimation.

A subtler, but more disturbing method of deterring the general population from taking to the streets was to frame protesters as belonging to ethnic or religious minorities. The most notorious case is Bahrain (Shiites), but it also happened in countries with moderate protests, such as Jordan (Palestinians), Morocco (converted Christians, sympathizers of the Polisario movement) and Algeria (Kabylis, Christians) (Desrués 2013: 417-418, Josua 2016a). Some of these ascriptions were ad hoc statements by individual officials in order to cater to resentments and prejudices by the "mainstream" population. In some cases, they have become entrenched, leading to societal divisions and suspicion of others. This strategy of othering not only brought up the delicate question of identity, but also exposed the minorities themselves to open challenges by their compatriots. The side effect of such labeling was to unsettle group members.

In a similar vein, government officials gradually employed and promoted a more nationalist discourse to deny the protesters' loyalty to the nation. This was a counter-reaction to the protesters' use of national symbols such as flags and their insistence that the demonstrations were directed against the regime, not against the state. Strategies like sectarian framing of protests as discord with strong religious undertones (in Arabic, *fitna*) were employed in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Syria (Heydemann and

Leenders 2014: 87f.), but this wording was also used in Algeria and Jordan.

Codified Nationalism

Xenophobic sentiment also translated into legal policies. Legislators in several states enacted laws that prevent dual citizens from assuming high public offices. This insulation was supposed to demonstrate that transnational ties and "foreign" influence were undesired. Egypt had had such a stipulation for a longer time, but Jordan followed suit after the protests in fall 2011. The new regulation came into force retroactively, which meant that sitting members of parliament and ministers were forced to either revoke their citizenship of another state (such as the United States, Canada or Syria) or resign from their post (The Jordan Times, 13 October 2011). On the one hand, this measure reflected a general growing suspicion of foreigners and "foreign agents." As shown above, this suspicion was partly evoked by state discourses. On the other hand, the new law posed "significant challenges for political inclusion for some of the most educated and well-trained Jordanians" (Tobin 2012: 97), not least those with a Palestinian background, who tend to hold dual citizenship more often than East Bank Jordanians do. Syria adopted a similar regulation in its 2012 constitution, Iraq attempted to codify a constitutional provision barring dual citizenship in 2009 and 2013, and most recently Algeria amended its constitution in 2016 with the same clause.

However, Jordan reversed its law in May 2016, as Egypt planned to do in 2015. Official newspapers have not given any particular reason for this change. One possible interpretation is that the signaling function of keeping non-exclusive nationals away from spoils was more important than implementing the actual policy. However, later the negative effect of excluding potential office holders who were competent or important for co-optation might have prevailed in the decision for revoking the regulation. In this case, the adoption of the law could result from transnational learning, while its abolishment would be due to historical (domestic) learning.

Denial of Public Space

Another widespread strategy was the physical exclusion of protesters by denying them public space. Authoritarian regimes in general have an ambivalent attitude towards public gatherings unless they are in the rulers' support. In the Arab uprisings, the appropriation of public space by protesters was the crucial point of empowerment. The ouster of Mubarak on February 11, 2011 was certainly a strong motivation for implementing harsh policing measures in the Algiers demonstrations that took place on the following day. On both days, all traffic to Algiers was halted, security forces checked cars and busses, preventing demonstrators from reaching the central meeting point at the Place du 1er Mai. Public servants and students were advised not to pursue their work in the capital in order to keep the streets empty. At the protest site, people were split into small groups to avoid larger mobilization of the population, so that just more than 1,000 protesters were met by 30,000 security forces. Analysts of Algerian politics cited previous domestic experiences with riot control as crucial for containing the protests. Although the massive presence of police has been a characteristic of Algeria's recent past, it would be plausible to attribute the high level of precaution at least partly to learning from the negative example of Egypt, probably combined with historical learning. Without the dangerous Egyptian precedent, the Algerian leadership might have been content with deploying less forces to counter the demonstration.

Following a similar logic of not allowing successful examples from abroad to gain hold domestically, in Bahrain the Pearl Roundabout's importance was recognized as a symbolic and infrastructural center for the protest movement. Also in this case, a recognition of the crucial role that Tahrir Square in Cairo played probably led to authorities "learning from the losers." Security forces therefore violently cleared Pearl Roundabout on the third day of its occupation in mid-February and for a second time in mid-March. Then they even destroyed the pearl monument in order to eliminate the protest movement's main symbol (Bank & Edel 2015: 15), going far beyond challenging the protesters' appropriation of public space.

Convergence Through Learning?

While the outcome of convergence towards exclusionary politics can be safely stated, tracing processes of learning is methodologically challenging. Learning in political science is understood as "a change of beliefs (or the degree of confidence in one's beliefs) or the development of new beliefs, skills, or procedures as a result of the observation and interpretation of experience" (Levy 1994: 283). In order to show that learning actually took place, first the "change in individual beliefs" and second policy change as a direct result of the changed beliefs should be observed (Levy 1994: 291). However, learning does not always lead to policy change, but is likely to be successful when it reifies existing beliefs, thus impeding policy change (id.: 290). It is important to bear in mind that learning does not have to mean innovation. Learning might also be the confirmation of working strategies from an established repertoire under new circumstances.

The chronological sequence of events is vital for identifying actual learners. Another desideratum is identifying the sources of learning. One central finding in Bank and Edel's study is that the models of learning are contingent upon "proximity – either in terms of geographical closeness or in terms of political similarity" (2015: 21). However, the threshold for establishing that learning has taken place is high because the cognitive processes among elites are a black box to outsiders who can only observe the policy outcomes. From a distance the evolution of individual decision-makers' calculations is difficult to conjecture. As in-depth interviews with decision-makers are not available for these examples, in the following I sketch how learning as the mechanism at work could be studied, avoiding the trap of false positives judging only from the common outcome of converging strategies.

In the cases of physical exclusion, a thorough study would aim to empirically show whether learning from Egypt's failure was a central part of the rationale behind massive protest proofing in Algeria and the destruction of the Pearl monument in Bahrain. Also counterfactual reasoning would help to strengthen an argument about the regional

influence that played into the calculus of decision-makers.

Regarding the legal provisions that exclude dual nationality holders from access to office, interviews with parliamentarians might provide insight into where the initiatives came from and whether the laws in other countries set the example. Even without direct evidence of authoritarian learning, the convergence on the legal level is striking. It is safe to say that the legal modifications were a response to a diffusing perception, namely the frame that foreigners are disloyal and the nation should be shielded against all kinds of external influence, even by dual nationals. A contrasting study of the cases where these laws have been subsequently abolished would be insightful for showing the locus of historical learning.

The common pattern of othering dissenters is also noteworthy, though direct learning is most difficult to trace here. The important result from the framing examples is that local conditions shaped the specific forms that these transnational patterns assumed to adapt them to the domestic audiences, as can be seen in the specific minority framing used in different countries. Nonetheless, the tendency of these discourses again converged around exclusion.

Outlook

What is striking about the exclusionary mechanisms described above is that they were present in countries belonging to different post-uprising trajectories, irrespective of the exact course of events. The patterns thus seem to reflect a general thrust towards more exclusion. This development also transcends the monarchy-republic gap. The variety and breadth of exclusionary strategies points at their relevance for autocracies in general. However, using them can backfire as they ultimately have far-reaching repercussions and develop self-fulfilling dynamics reinforcing prejudices. The normative dimension of such a shift of repertoires has worrying consequences, almost inevitably leading to an erosion of societal cohesion.

Finally, how distinctive are the phenomena described above? Such patterns of exclusion are not unique to the Arab world, as Lisel Hintz (2016) showed in her study of Turkey. But even going beyond the Middle East, there is nothing specifically regional about the strategies. Nationalist discourses and the repression of dissent below the threshold of violent force are trademarks of authoritarian regimes worldwide. Nonetheless, exclusionary policies have been specifically justified by weathering the crisis of the Arab uprisings. In this sense, a historical moment offered the chance for implementing the described policies. After providing a glimpse into selected mechanisms of exclusion, the ways in which such repressive actions are justified to domestic and international audiences deserves to be studied in more detail.

Bank, André and Edel, Mirjam 2015, 'Authoritarian Regime Learning: Comparative Insights from the Arab Uprisings', *GIGA Working Paper 274*, June, Hamburg: GIGA.

Desrues, Thierry 2013: 'Mobilizations in a Hybrid Regime: The 20th February Movement and the Moroccan Regime', in: *Current Sociology* 61 (4), 409–423.

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Hintz, Lisel 2016: 'Adding Insult to Injury: Vilification as Counter-Mobilization in Turkey's Gezi Protests,' Memo prepared for the POMEPS workshop, "From Mobilization to Counter-Revolution: The Arab Spring in Comparative Perspective," held on May 3-4, 2016. Online: <http://pomeps.org/2016/06/06/adding-insult-to-injury-vilification-as-counter-mobilization-in-turkeys-gezi-protests/>

Josua, Maria 2016a: 'If You Can't Include Them, Exclude Them: Countering the Arab Uprisings in Algeria and Jordan,' *GIGA Working Paper* 286, May, Hamburg: GIGA.

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Collaboration and Community amongst the Arab Monarchies

Sean Yom, Temple University

The Arab uprisings resulted in regime change in several Middle East republics but none of the monarchies (Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates). Since 2011-12, scholars have expressed renewed interest in the so-called durability of the Arab kingships, attempting to explain their cultural heritage, institutional endowments, and rentier wealth.¹ Yet we should study not only what these royal autocracies *are* in terms of structure, but also what they *do*, in terms of agency. We must understand how they made certain choices and implemented new policies in an effort to survive.

In doing so, we can observe authoritarian diffusion

1 See, for instance, Victor Menaldo, "The Middle East and North Africa's Resilient Monarchs," *Journal of Politics* 74, 3 (2012): 707-722; Sean Yom and F. Gregory Gause, "Resilient Royals: How Arab Monarchies Hang On," *Journal of Democracy* 23, 3 (2012): 74-88; and André Bank, Thomas Richter, and Anna Sunik, "Long-Term Monarchical Survival in the Middle East: A Configurational Comparison, 1945-2012," *Democratization* 22, 1 (2015): 179-200.

since 2011, in particular how the spread of common norms and ideas has helped catalyze unprecedented policy convergence among these eight regimes sharing a revitalized pan-royal identity. Many of the Arab monarchies have implemented shared policies in areas such as societal policing, sectarian inflammation, media suppression, and Gulf Cooperation Council expansion. This brief essay suggests that we cannot explain such convergence, the kind of inter-regime cooperation that Thomas Richter and André Bank invoke in their introductory essay, without first locating its ideational origins. Put another way, diffusion matters in this context as a *causal* variable, as the mechanism engendering a new pan-royal identity that, in turn, has facilitated policy collaboration and convergence among eight authoritarian monarchies.

There is some precedent for theorizing this. For one, comparative scholars know that much like liberal democracies share "best practices" and norms,

authoritarian regimes can diffuse “worst practices” regarding their repression, financing, and governance. Essays in this volume by Steve Heydemann, Maria Josua, and May Darwich show how Arab regimes have picked up specific practices of coercion and financing from one another during both war and peace. The other theoretical foundation comes from international relations. IR theorists know well how not just material interests but *ideas* enable disparate political groups to behave in concerted ways across borders. Work on epistemic communities as well as security communities uses that contested term, “community,” to show how shared truths (i.e., consensual ways of viewing the world and processing information), allow actors to *perceive* one another as equal parts of a bigger collectivity that share a common identity and thus fate.² The metaphor of community provides a striking way to interpret how Arab monarchies (i.e., not just kings but also senior princes, cabinet ministers, and advisers tied to the palace) are coming to see and treat one another – as not simply strategic allies in a materialist sense, but also members of an embattled community of royalism whose way of political life is under attack.

What makes the Mideast monarchies distinctive, however, is that these regimes have tended to emulate and learn from one another far more than their republican allies since the Arab uprisings. Simply being a non-democracy is not enough: one must be a member of that endangered species called absolute monarchism to reap the fruits of this brand of diffusion. The closest historical equivalent to such selectivity within a broader landscape of regional authoritarianism is perhaps Operation Condor, the decade-long effort by the military intelligence services of Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay to eliminate leftist dissent. From 1975 through the mid-1980s, these leaderships exterminated numerous dissidents whose very existence threatened their shared model of right-wing bureaucratic-authoritarianism. The collaboration

2 Emanuel Adler and Peter Haas, “Epistemic Communities, World Order, and the Creation of a Reflective Research Program,” *International Organization*, 46,1 (1992): 367-390; Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (London: Routledge, 2001);

among Arab monarchies since 2011 may well inaugurate a more modernized, stealthier version of such selective international cooperation. Little reported in the Western media, the interior ministers of the Arab League have met annually under the auspices of the Arab Interior Ministers Council, based in Tunis since the early 1980s. Like Operation Condor, these summits have allowed regime watchdogs to innovate and share new technologies of repression.³ Further, outside the region, autocratic “great powers” Russia and China counter liberal democratic norms by diffusing their own models of security and stability, in particular utilizing mechanisms like coercion and competition to promote authoritarianism in their respective spheres of influence.⁴

A Royal “We”

The Arab uprisings threatened all autocracies in the Mideast, but they made royal voices especially doubtful about their viability in the modern world. By viability, I mean the prospects for survival not simply as dictatorships (as there are plenty everywhere), but rather as biological enterprises built upon the twin pillars of familial succession and near-absolute control over the state apparatus. During 2011, calls for *malakiyyah destouriyyah* (constitutional monarchy) from newly mobilized voices in these societies – not just suppressed minorities, but also students, workers, clerics, professionals, and others – resonated. For palace hardliners, the notion of constitutional monarchism was a “virus” contagiously spreading across their societies.⁵ It cut as deeply as protest buzzwords like *isqaat* (downfall) due to its normative implications: it reminded absolutists that they were among the last royals left in the world clinging onto the coercive reigns of state ownership. One Gulf prince admitted that even the oil-rich kingdoms were

3 “Qam‘ ‘arabi ‘abir lil-qaarat,” *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 18 March 2010.

4 See, for instance, Thomas Ambrosio, “The Rise of the ‘China Model’ and ‘Beijing Consensus’: Evidence of Authoritarian Diffusion?” *Contemporary Politics* 18, 4 (2012): 381-399; Alexander Cooley, “Countering Democratic Norms,” *Journal of Democracy* 26, 2 (2015): 49-63; and Christian von Soest, “Democracy Prevention: The International Collaboration of Authoritarian Regimes,” *European Journal of Political Science* 54 (2015): 623-638.

5 “Malakiyyah destouriyyah maghribiyyah... masdar qaliq khaliiji,” *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 2 July 2011.

not “100 percent immune” to the uprisings, for at stake were principles of political representation rather than questions of economic well-being.”⁶ Indeed, some royals felt that this crisis posed a greater threat than the heyday of Arab Nationalism, which swept away royalism in Egypt, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya, for two reasons. First, unlike the turbulence of the 1950s and 1960s, absolutist royalism by 2011 had become virtually extinct *everywhere else*; outside the Middle East, only Swaziland and Brunei still abided by its tenets. Second, whereas Arab Nationalism was conveyed as a regional threat emanating from republican capitals like Cairo and Damascus, demands for constitutionalism came from the monarchies’ own societies.

Such existential fear compelled many leaders to fall back on the common norms that bound their familial regimes together. Between private dialogues and public media articulations, these consensual truths were many. One prominent example was the internalized principle of dynastic superiority, or “blood over ballots.” Blood over ballots establishes not only the distinction between monarchism and republicanism but also enshrines eternal political inequality: all else being equal, the *worst* member of a royal family still has more legitimacy to rule than the *best* commoner from society. Whereas father-son succession in dynastic republics like Syria or Azerbaijan was justified *ex post facto* on pragmatic grounds of national cohesion or effective leadership, monarchical power-holding rests upon a genetic argument implying that blood alone renders the ruling family’s claim to power immune to popular contestation.

These and other consensual truths rendered visible a new pan-royal identity that coalesced by spring 2011. This identity manifested through increased communication among the monarchies, which included not only direct lines between kings but also the lower-level exchanges between cabinet ministers, senior princes, and private emissaries. While much of this interaction was hidden

6 “Duwwal al-khalij laysat muhsana dhidd al-thawrat [Qatari PM: Gulf Countries Not Impervious to the Revolutions],” *Al-Akhabar Al-Yawm*, 10 November 2011.

from the Arab media (and even when uttered, was glossed over with opaque euphemisms), one indicator of this shift was the increased level of talks involving only the monarchies. Frequent summits of foreign ministers representing just these eight countries exemplified this.⁷ These meetings brought together not just official emissaries but also various senior princes who could build upon previous interfamilial links crafted by decades of intermarriage, cross-investments, and social networks. Other cases of direct cross-royal exchanges were more obvious, such as the Jordanian regime emulating its Moroccan counterpart in promulgating constitutional “reforms” by summer 2011 in order to appease peaceful yet stubborn protests.⁸

The diffusion and coalescence of this pan-royal identity – an Arab royal “we” – should not imply that the Arab monarchies intended to form some grand confederation. Neither does it herald the sublimation of underlying identities (e.g., tribal, national, geographic, familial), or even the elimination of past rivalries. Social scientists know well that identities are not only malleable but also compete with one another; the existence of one does not preclude the subsistence of another. The brief ideological spat between the Qatari and Saudi monarchies over which political faction to back in transiting states like Egypt and Tunisia, for instance, occurred at the same time that they both participated in more frequent monarchical meetings and communications. Pluralism is part of any communal social order, and only by considering the full range of patterned behaviors and ideas can we gain a textured appreciation of how complex this realm of ideas and beliefs is.

Monarchical Cooperation

Starting in 2011, then, pan-royalism was a new source of collaborative policymaking among these monarchies. It was notably stronger than the old fear felt by the Gulf

7 “Ijtima’ wuzaraa’ khaarijyyah duwwal majlis al-ta’aawun al-khaliji wal-magrib wal-urdun al-ahad,” *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 9 September 2011.

8 André Bank and Mirjam Edel, “Authoritarian Regime Learning: Comparative Insights from the Arab Uprisings,” GIGA Working Paper No. 274 (2015), Hamburg, Germany.

kingdoms in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. There, the threat generated by the new Islamic Republic was conveyed in sectarian terms, and localized to the Arabian Peninsula – dictated more by place and religion rather than reactionary critiques of monarchism itself, and not exactly the catalyst for any new Gulf-oriented (*khaliji*) identity amongst Saudi Arabia and its five neighboring kingdoms.⁹

Still, how can we ascertain whether pan-royalism palpably spurred new forms of monarchical collaboration? One way is to examine specific cases of policy convergence and consider rival materialist explanations. Take, for instance, the effort to expand the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) by bringing in Morocco and Jordan alongside the six Gulf kingdoms. Completely bypassing the Arab League, this idea was first advocated in February 2011 and, despite some stumbles, is still discussed in foreign ministerial meetings. Some observers saw the initiative as an effort to convert the GCC, an otherwise ineffectual security alliance, into a broader “monarchies’ club” that could create a symbolic firewall protecting the royal autocracies from everyone else.¹⁰

Establishing close ties to the oil-rich Gulf made strategic sense to resource-poor Jordan and Morocco, since they would receive far greater economic and invest aid. Yet what realistic benefit would it bring to the Gulf kingdoms? Neither the fly arc of Moroccan fighter jets nor the defensive prowess of Jordanian infantry would be much use in potential war against Iran. Likewise, the GCC intervention in Bahrain in March 2011 demonstrated that Saudi Arabia alone could help its smaller allies squash domestic threats. Geography likewise cannot explain this impetus from the Gulf to better protect its monarchical brethren. The Saleh regime in neighboring Yemen had long lobbied to gain entrance into this alliance, but to little avail; even at the height of its unrest, no official suggested

inserting Yemen into the GCC in order to preserve this allied dictatorship.

Rather, the GCC expansionist policy reflected novel framework of pan-royalism kindled in the fires of the Arab uprisings. The heightened perception among monarchical voices that they were more alike than different ironically also explains why some of the smaller Gulf kingdoms slowed down the expansion process by 2012, preferring instead a longer timeline of negotiated admission. Reportedly, some in smaller Gulf kingdoms like Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman feared the contagious spread of popular protests *from* Morocco and Jordan *to* the Gulf, given the similarities these countries apparently shared.¹¹

Another example of greater monarchical collaboration occurs in the realm of domestic policy, with the practice of “cross-policing,” in which royal governments smother domestic critics of *other* Arab monarchies, even if those critics never opposed their own dynasty. Since 2012, there have been dozens of cases of cross-policing across the monarchies. Only a few have broached the Western media, such as the incarceration of Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood official Zaki Bani Irsheid for criticizing the United Arab Emirates, or the startling detention of Kuwaiti parliamentarians due to their censure of Saudi policies and Bahraini treatment of Shi’a. These cases are but the tip of the iceberg.

Cross-policing is hardly a new practice and has occurred between republics and monarchies in the past as well as the present – for instance, the Sissi regime in Egypt cracking down on anti-Saudi dissent. Yet two aspects of specifically royal cross-policing suggest that something deeper and ideational is operating: *timing* and *domain*. In terms of timing, virtually all cross-policing cases among the monarchies began after the November 2012 Joint Security Agreement issued by the Gulf kingdoms and to which Morocco and Jordan assented. The JSA, first proposed in late 2011, called for signatories to

9 Michael Barnett and F. Gregory Gause, “Caravans in Opposite Directions: State, Society, and the Development of Community in the Gulf Cooperation Council,” in *Security Communities*, 186-189.

10 “Tabaayin bi-sha’n tawsi’ majlis al-ta’aawun,” *Al-Jazeera.net*, 17 May 2011.

11 “Jalsa sirri: sultanat oman taqud al-mu’aradha li-dhim al-urdun wal-maghrab lil-khaliji...” *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 14 December 2011.

“suppress interference in the domestic affairs” of other kingdoms, among other new requirements that blurred the boundaries between these kingdoms.¹²

Second, the act of cross-policing has required syncretic legal framing and transnational coordination between the monarchies to a far greater degree than necessary given past practices of *ad hoc* crackdowns. Since 2012, the majority of the Arab kingdoms have promulgated revised “anti-terror” statutes that have not only extended the criminalization of speech to include all the monarchies but also expanded the purview of state monitoring itself to new areas, such as online social networks. Further, there have been almost no cases of cross-policing occurring from monarchy to republic; for instance, Jordanian censors are keen on preserving the image of the Gulf kingdoms, but seldom make trouble for critics of Egypt. In short, many of the Arab monarchies have systematized their legal strategies of suppressing reformist sentiments.

Other examples of greater monarchical collaboration since the Arab uprisings that demand further research include the deliberate amplification of Sunni chauvinism during 2011-12 that went hand-in-hand with retrenching monarchist power, as well as democratic diffusion-proofing, or common strategies of sanitizing media discourse and manipulate the public sphere in order to better insulate the domestic citizenry from external democratic norms.

At the same time, this exploratory probe comes with a disclaimer. As constructivists have long understood, empirically *proving* that an idea, truth, or identity fundamentally *caused* a certain policy shift is difficult. Perceptions are notoriously intersubjective, and even the best evidence may reflect hindsight bias. Still, there is abundant reason to consider how the diffusion of pan-royalism and the creation of a new communal order can help explain the origins and trajectory of monarchical collaboration since 2011, either as a substitute or else a complement to more traditional rationalist explanations. At the most, this proposition begs for further study; at the least, it dispels any lingering assumption that monarchism does not matter in the modern Middle East.

¹² For one rare example of English reportage, see Madawi Al-Rasheed, “Kuwaiti Activists Targeted Under GCC Security Pact,” *Al-Monitor*, 20 March 2015.

Contagious Crumbling? Stability, Breakdown, and the Diffusion of Arab State Failure

Oliver Schlumberger, University of Tübingen

The three major outcomes of the Arab uprisings

This memo first maintains that there are three essential outcomes of the Arab uprisings of 2011, then focuses on one of them that I claim is the least studied. While the question of the title is answered to with a clear “no,” a larger new field of research appears on the horizon to which, by way of conclusion, I briefly suggest a few lessons to be taken into account as well as some possible starting points for further research.

It is often cited that four dictators were ousted as a consequence of the Arab uprisings and that Tunisia provides a (however fragile) case of democratic transition, disproving essentialist arguments about the absence of democracy in the Middle East. This, however, is but one out of three major political outcomes of the recent protest wave. A second is the survival of at least a dozen authoritarian regimes in the MENA region, lending credibility to the broad literature on authoritarian resilience, authoritarian learning, and strategies of regime survival. A less investigated third outcome is that not only regimes, but also states as such¹ seem to have increasingly come under stress as a consequence of the mass uprisings, to the point where state fragility or, grave yet, of state collapse is imminent or manifest. This contribution focuses on the third and least studied outcome, which doubtlessly constitutes one of the “crucial current political dynamics” that Bank and Richter (2016) refer to in their conceptual note for the recent workshop.

The new relevance of statehood in the Middle East and North Africa

While a handful of state structures² such as Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Palestine had, for various reasons, been infamous for the precarious state of their statehood prior to the Arab uprisings, the 2010s have brought to the

fore a new dimension of state fragility in the region. Not only have the remnants of statehood in Iraq and Yemen worsened, but with Libya and Syria, two new cases have joined the “Arab league of failing states.” Yet other cases, including some with a comparatively longer history of independent statehood such as Egypt, Bahrain or even Morocco, cannot easily dismiss observers’ worries about the longer-term sustainability of their statehood.

In this politically diverse new Middle East and North Africa, Tunisia and Egypt under Sisi arguably occupy two poles on a continuum of political regimes. However, the group of states that either dramatically fail to fulfil the core functions associated with statehood³ (usually termed state failure) or that simply seem to dissolve physically (usually labelled state collapse) has been growing since 2011.

This becomes particularly evident when looking at the three republics (apart from Egypt and Tunisia) that underwent massive political change as a direct consequence of the 2011 upheavals: Syria, Yemen, and Libya. Two saw an – at least formal – removal of the respective dictators (Yemen and Libya), whereas the third, Syria, continues to be headed by Bashar al-Assad whose regime has not been able to regain control over the entire territory ever since the conflict turned violent. Arguably, in summer 2015, it was mainly Russia’s massive air force support and ground troops that helped keeping Assad’s regime in place.

The former Yemeni president Ali Saleh, for his part, continues to be actively involved in Yemeni politics, inter alia by allegedly spin-doctoring – in an unlikely alliance with Shiite Houthi rebels – the January 2015 fall of his successor government led by Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi while eyeing to his return to the presidency. In the meantime, a UN-brokered “National Dialogue Conference” (NDC) chaired by interim president Hadi seemed

promising until early 2014, when it ended after two Houthi representatives were assassinated within a few weeks only and the group withdrew from the NDC (cf. NDC 2015; Gaston 2014). While many of its eleven standing working groups had made considerable progress towards national reconciliation between most relevant social forces (except for al-Qaeda), it was the Southern issue that remained unsolved with no roadmap on how to achieve further progress. This was likely also due to the fact that while the HIRAK movement was part of the NDC, other Southern groups remained excluded. Thus, while Yemen has figured high in the Fund for Peace's *Fragile States Index*' (FSI's) ranking for many years, the regime collapse after the breakdown of the NDC is qualitatively different from the regime's long-term failure to deliver essential public goods. In Yemen as well as in Syria, today the state itself is up for grabs by competing powers who all try, by violent means, to capture and re-build central state institutions.

Both in Syria and in Yemen this struggle over the state has been accompanied by the renewed rise of militant Jihadist actors who not only oppose the formerly well-established regimes, but also propose alternative visions of a state. Notably in the case of the "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria" (ISIS or, in its Arabic acronym, *da'esh*), a transnationalized understanding of statehood is debased from its notion of territoriality which almost all definitions of statehood include as a key marker. In that sense, ISIS's vision of its Islamic State can be seen as either a "plurinational" state, to borrow Bolivian president Evo Morales' term, or even as a non-nation state.

Syria, Libya, and Yemen all fell into prolonged and at least regionalized (and in the Syrian case globalized) violent strife for power over the state to an extent that statehood as such is less of a given than it was before 2011. Some see good reasons to classify the Libyan case, too, into the same box of violent conflict after the breakdown of a prior authoritarian regime: It resembles both other cases insofar as non-state armed groups (ISIS as well as others) could make considerable inroads there both in terms of followers and territorial gains. It resembles the Yemeni case insofar as the country has fallen into prolonged political crisis with

two opposing governments in Tobruq and Tripoli, each of which claimed to act as the legitimate representative of the Libyan people. The December-2015 agreement that enabled the establishment of a "Government of National Accord" still has uncertain prospects of pacifying the country in the light of greatly factionalized militias and splits in both the Tobruq and the new unity government.

Apart from the three cases discussed here, however, we must not forget the range of other countries of the MENA that remain fragile. Lebanon has long experienced a volatile situation, which is even truer yet of Iraq. Less thought of in that context, Egypt and Iran also figure among the FSI's 50 most fragile countries (out of 178). Taken together, the group of fragile, failed or collapsed states makes for no less than seven countries of the core of the MENA region, and Palestine is not even listed in the FSI. Furthermore, if the geographical margins of the region were to be taken into account, Arab League members such as Mauritania, Djibouti, Somalia and Sudan would have to be added. In fact, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are the only Arab states which the FSI rates as "stable" (Fund for Peace 2016).

This all means that roughly half of the Arab political entities today are either directly threatened by or have already fallen victim to state failure. While the task of studying authoritarian resilience has thus certainly not vanished for scholars, researchers as well as policy-makers will have to give much greater consideration to questions of statehood in this post uprisings region.

Is there a diffusion of state failure?

Some factors may seem to support the assumption that there is an element of contagion or diffusion in the processes sketched out above. When looking for potential causes for the observed accumulation of state decay in the MENA region, two overarching factors might be relevant: Temporality and territoriality. By temporality I mean, in this context, the proximity in time of cases of regime breakdown and subsequent state failure and/or collapse as it happened in Yemen, Libya and Syria and beyond. This

proximity in time is undoubtedly given.

Territoriality, however, seems more questionable: Among the prominent three cases I have focused on above, one is in the Levant, one in North Africa, and one on the outermost edges of the Gulf peninsula. While students of “democratic diffusion” differ as to what factors they see as causal for the spatial clustering of democratization processes, they unanimously do tell us that the likelihood of diffusion processes increases with geographic proximity (cf., i.a., Starr 1991; O’Loughlin et al. 1998; Gleditsch & Ward 2006; Elkink 2011; Brinks & Coppedge 2006). If we assume that diffusion of regime traits has anything in common with the diffusion of the erosion of statehood and that it is thus permissible to adopt the theorem of geographic proximity influencing such diffusion processes, then the territorial dimension seems less given in the clustering of state failure/collapse in the MENA than the temporal one.

Therefore, it seems wise to search for factors other than purely geographical ones in order to carve out reasons for the sudden downfall not only of political regimes but also of states. Diffusion in the simplistic sense of spill-over processes that permeate world regions due to geographic proximity seems counterintuitive as the causal chain would need to be very long for such spill-overs of state failure. In that sense, then, it seems fairly safe to answer the question of whether there is a (direct or simple) diffusion of state failure/state collapse in the negative. However strong authoritarian learning or cooperation may be, it obviously failed in preventing a number of regimes from falling apart to the point that the state as such eroded and collapsed.

Three Lessons

As signals of state failure within the region are quite obviously cumulating, there must be reasons for this. Searching for explanations to the recent clustering of state failures in the MENA, the option that is probably closest at hand would be to look into the monarchy-republic divide – and quite a number of authors have recently done so (e.g., Lucas 2014; Derichs & Demmelhuber 2014; Bank,

Richter & Sunik 2014; idem. 2015). Some have argued that this is related to the specific position of monarchs as residing “above” their polities and not even theoretically up for contestation (e.g., Williamson 2012; Hinnebusch 2015: 30), while others have discussed the specific sources of legitimacy available to monarchs but not to presidents (Schlumberger 2010).

Yet this new literature on monarchical survival likely contains a bias in that it overemphasizes monarchical survival in the sense that monarchies did come under pressure as a consequence of the recent mass protests, whereas it may underestimate republican survival (e.g., if cases such as Egypt are considered as breakdowns of political order as such)⁴. Remember that the first international military intervention was not the Western alliance in Libya, but rather the Saudi led GCC forces in Bahrain, whose state may not have survived without it⁵. And while Jordan, with a cosmetic reaction, remained relatively quiet, the long-term stability of Morocco is certainly not a given even though the regime managed to disperse the 20 February movement quickly by pro-actively embarking on constitutional reform, thus presenting the king as a spearheading positive change. On the other hand, republics such as Egypt count as regime breakdowns in most analyses, which remains highly doubtful in the light of the fact that at no point in time did Egypt’s military elite cede political power (which it arguably has occupied ever since 1952). Thus, there are at least several non-marginal question marks that render the monarchy-republic distinction a less airtight explanation of statehood failure in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings.

Apart from the empirical question marks, however, another such question is what we actually mean when we say that four of the republics “did not survive” whereas all of the monarchies did. In Egypt, I would argue, the regime certainly did survive, but statehood increasingly came under stress. More concretely, we need to distinguish more carefully between “regime” on the one hand and “state” on the other when talking about “survival” or “stability.” Tunisia, for instance, represents a case of regime breakdown while statehood remained intact. Syria, by

contrast, lends itself as an example of a regime being more resilient even than the state it ran, and thus represents, in a sense, the opposite of Tunisia (i.e. regime survival despite state failure). Before the breakdown of the National Dialogue, Yemen could also be placed in that category, but after the Hadi government stepped down, both regime and state have not only failed but de facto collapsed. Thus, there is an urgent need to better and more carefully map the phenomena we are talking about, as the Arab uprisings did not just happen “between democratization and authoritarian persistence” on the regime level, but also on the level of the state.

Three lessons follow from the above: First, and on an analytical level, we need to distinguish more carefully than before between the concepts of “state” on the one hand and “regime” on the other. A second conclusion sounds trivial but has largely been ignored by a good deal of the respective literature: we also need to distinguish more carefully between state failure (referring to the functional dimension) on the one hand and state collapse (referring to the institutional dimension) on the other. Third, as has become obvious from the above, neither diffusion in a simple sense of spillover effects due to geographic proximity nor the monarchy-republic divide seem to offer convincing explanations for the more prominent role precarious statehood as such plays in the post-2011 Middle East (and accordingly for future research).

Some Starting Points for Further Analysis

A first core factor that needs attention in a more microscopic examination of the clustering of state failure in the Middle East is its international dimension and more precisely direct military intervention. In all three cases highlighted above, foreign military forces have massively intervened in search of an outcome to conflictual situations that caters to their own interests. This story starts with the Saudi-led GCC intervention into Bahrain with the goal of saving its monarchy from the challenge posed by street protests; apparently, neighboring regimes did not trust in the success of the Bahraini monarchy’s narrative about the uprisings as being merely Iran-inspired sectarian

strife. The intervention gave Bahraini security forces the necessary leeway to clamp down on protesters in Pearl Roundabout and crush the protests. However, after a sham national dialogue that faded away without tangible results, the Bahraini state is still precarious, while protesters to a large extent did not buy hastily made-up “evidence” that was supposed to “prove” the uprising was instigated by Iran and was only Shiite in nature.

Likewise, the downfall of colonel Ghaddafi’s regime came about through the establishment of a no-fly zone and military intervention by NATO and allied Arab forces. Even today, under the national unity government, external forces continue to actively support autonomous militias that operate outside (and at times against) the command of the new central government the establishment of which was brokered by the UN between the opponent competing predecessors, the GNC in Tripoli and the House of Representatives at Tobruq. One example among others is the “Libyan National Army,” a militia run by General Haftar who refuses to support the UN-backed unity government and which is being supported by Egypt and the UAE (Ezzat 2016), among others, as well as reportedly even by Western countries (Al-Jazeera 2016). And in Syria, not only Russian air-force assisted the Assad regime, but also ground troops of similar origin, while reports about special forces from the US, the UK, France and Germany operating within Syria (albeit mostly combatting ISIS), abound. In Yemen, finally, it is once more Saudi Arabia that has intervened directly militarily, allegedly committing war crimes against the Yemeni population (Mohamed & Shaif 2016). Saudi Arabia is leading a coalition that consisted of forces from nine Arab states⁶ plus a range of apparently UAE-trained mercenaries of various countries of origin (Hager & Manzetti 2015). In 2015-16 alone, Moroccan, Saudi, Emirati, Australian, Bahraini, Sudanese and Colombian soldiers and officers as well as privately contracted soldiers have reportedly been killed inside Yemen (The Australian 2015; Almasmari 2015), while an attack on a coalition base in the Maarib province lead to the UAE’s largest military casualties in the history of its armed forces (Ghobari 2015).

Second, it is not only direct military intervention but, equally important in the international dimension, the *indirect involvement* of external actors that has sparked or reinforced processes of state failure and collapse. It must be equally stressed that arms, persons and ideas travel easily across borders in today's Middle East. There is little doubt today among observers that financing of arms and equipment by various Gulf countries of Syrian rebel groups greatly influenced both the relative strength of individual groups and the direction of the course of events within the Syrian conflict. Likewise, the U.S. and British support to the Saudi-led coalition in the Yemeni conflict plays a major role in the destruction of the country. Not only have cluster bombs of American origin reportedly caused great humanitarian damage, but the arms sales in general, by the U.S. and the UK, have contributed to the coalition's ability to execute large-scale military operations in that country. More than 2.5 million internally displaced civilians and 83 per cent of Yemen's population depending on humanitarian assistance are just one result of this conflict (cf. Mohamed & Shaif 2016).

Thus, even though "state intervention and coercion fall outside the scope of this concept [cooperation; OS] due to the massive pressure exercised by more powerful actors" (Bank & Richter 2016: 3), the strategies and policies of external actors, in both their direct and indirect dimensions, remain a forceful explanatory element for the spatial clustering of state failure and state collapse in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings. Much more systematic and in-depth research is necessary to unearth the mechanisms and consequences by which actors within and outside the region have actively contributed to the phenomenon under scrutiny here, which is beyond the scope of this memo.

Third, however, such direct and indirect international involvement does not explain everything. When cases of an erosion of statehood accumulate to the extent seen today in the Arab world, this might well be a sign of a more general underlying process that transcends the mere fact that borders are permeable and boundaries are porous. They have been porous before. The discussed

accumulation of state failure and fragility in today's Middle East comes with a quite successful project, not of state decay, but of state-building, namely the one undertaken by ISIS. Through a very simple ideology, large-enough amounts of people and resources have successfully been mobilized for their leaders to engage in a project that can arguably be described as the building of a state-like entity that, at least within the territory it controls, manages to fulfil several of the functions of traditional states (such as extraction, monopoly to the use of force, effective administration, etc.). This Janus-faced process of state erosion on the one hand and state-building on the other might well hint to a deeper underlying crisis of legitimacy of the political orders established decades ago.

Violence, as the absence of security (probably *the* core state function), usually does not *start* at the international level. At least in the cases discussed here, there has been a highly conflictual constellation of actors on the domestic scene before military intervention that usually involved equally high levels of violence exercised mostly by state agents, but which cannot fully be captured by the state's Weberian claim to the "monopoly of violence." Rather, it is the equally Weberian legitimacy of that claim that, in the perception of large parts of the societies concerned, has been absent before violence by non-state actors spread against ruling regimes.

Traditionally, one of the strongest generators of a sense of legitimate rule has been reference to a common national belonging shared by the ruled. Related to this, another observation could provide a potential starting point for a preliminary mapping of state failure in the Middle East: The cases of state failure and/or collapse that have occurred in the MENA arguably differ in kind. For some cases, the question of national unity (or the lack thereof), which had been highlighted by Rustow (1970) decades ago, plays an obvious role (e.g., Libya, Yemen, but potentially also for Bahrain). This point does not only refer to the variable ethnic heterogeneity, but represents a question that touches directly on the concept of the nation-state in a broader sense.⁷ Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria can all be said to have a significant awareness of a common

nationhood, despite marked differences in the degree of ethnic and religious heterogeneity.⁸ Thus, not only a sharper differentiation between state and regime, but also a mapping along the dimensions of state vs. nation could potentially also yield insights into the observed phenomenon of an accumulation of state failure in the Middle East.

But more needs to be said on the issue of intra-societally conflictual constellations of actors. While the majority of Arab countries today are involved in various sorts of military action outside their own borders, the majority of those conflicts stem from struggles over who owns the right to rule within national borders. Thus, at the heart of most of today's cases of state failure and collapse lie domestic disputes over political rule, and over how political rule can legitimately be exercised.

In this respect, then, the question of whether it was a president or a monarch who has been toppled, and even the question of whether such a toppling has actually occurred or not, are maybe not the ones of utmost importance. Rather, we need more fine-grained analyses about the nature and degree of conflict and consent that exist between incumbents and those they govern. States in which the relationship between rulers and ruled is highly conflictual are, in this view, more likely candidates for the outbreak of violent conflict which, in turn, may lead to state erosion and collapse. In the words of one of the most prominent liberal thinkers: "To the extent that one tries to suppress social conflicts, these gain in potential virulence, thus demand for yet more violent suppression, until finally no power on earth is able to repress the energies of conflict that have been bereft their expression" (Dahrendorf 1961: 226). In that sense, then, we are cast back to the question of the nature of political regimes when analyzing state failure. In other words, the coincidence of the Middle East having been the world's most unfree region for decades and the fact that now, after protests erupted, a most striking cluster of state failure and collapse emerges, might not be entirely accidental. This observation may come with potentially massive implications for the policy community: Western strategies to support some of the world's most

repressive leaders for the sake of gaining "stability" have, *grosso modo*, not changed after the Arab uprisings. But in the light of the above, this could actually not only fail to produce political stability in one of the world's most conflict-ridden regions, but also directly contribute to the exacerbation of intra-societal conflict.

The suggestions presented here obviously cannot, in themselves, deliver a comprehensive explanation for the phenomenon of state failure and state collapse in the Middle East. However, they can provide possible new lenses for looking at the phenomenon that might enable us to see things we might otherwise miss. That said, the range of other potentially relevant factors still remains broad. At least some of those that have not been discussed here will sound familiar. This is not least because they are likely symptomatic of the intimate link between statehood and political regimes that exists – despite the above call for a more careful differentiation between the two.

In sum, the look at the Middle Eastern political landscape presented here may serve to identify elements of a future agenda for research. While the puzzles of such an agenda will likely be too vast for any individual project to resolve, I hope that the ideas sketched out here might help in identifying possible avenues for further research.

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(Endnotes)

1 There is no room here to engage in a deeper discussion about contending definitions of the "state." Suffice it here to say that for the present uses an understanding of the state that is informed essentially by Max Weber's (1947 [1922]: Ch. 1, § 17) classical (and in many contemporary definitions still crucial) elements of a state as the set of public institutions which lay (successful) claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of force to rule politically over a given population within an identifiable territory. Cf. also Dubreuil (2010: 189); a good introductory overview of approaches to studying the state is by Hay, Lister & Marsh (2006).

Likewise, I use the term "state failure" here in a rather "naïve" way with little differentiation simply because there is no room to engage in larger conceptual discussions. For useful critiques of the concept, see, i.a., Call (2008); Eriksen (2010); or Boege et al. (2009).

2 By this term, I do not mean to imply any statement about the legal status of disputed territories. Rather, this text is about the non-legal dimensions of statehood.

3 These are security, welfare, and representation; cf., i.a., Milliken & Krause (2002). Note that contrary to most readings, “representation” is not synonymous with the specific kind of *democratic* representation that is achieved through free and fair elections, but what has to be represented is referred to by these authors as “the symbolic identity of state subjects” (ibid.: 757).

4 I contend that Egypt represents a case of neither a breakdown of statehood nor of regime.

5 Additionally, the international community all too quickly bought the Bahraini regime’s discourse about the sectarian nature of the protests and did not respond positively to local demands for change, but rather quietly endorsed Saudi Arabia’s intervention.

6 These are: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, Morocco, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Sudan, and Jordan.

7 Two other dimensions are directly linked to this question of the “nation”: First, the common strategy used by authoritarian leaders to “play the identity card” (or to engage pro-actively in sectarian policies) as part of a divide-and-rule tactics for autocratic regime maintenance, and second, the increasingly common trans-nationalization of political conflicts in cases where statehood has been weakened, as happened in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, and others.

8 A striking case is the failure of the state in Palestine where the sense of nationhood is likely larger than in any other Middle Eastern state-like entity.



To Intervene or Not to Intervene? The Use of Military Force as Coercive Mechanism of Autocratic Diffusion

May Darwich, Durham University

The 2011 Arab uprisings appeared to some to indicate a wave of democracy shaking long-lasting autocratic regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Syria. However, this overjoyed moment that was supposed to sweep Arab countries along the path of regime change, very quickly evaporated as authoritarian regimes adopted measures countering democratic diffusion across the region. Just as the growing literature on the international dimension of authoritarianism observed in previous historical waves, the 2011 uprisings have been followed by counter-diffusion waves (Weyland 2013; Gunitsky 2014; Elkins and Simmons 2005). The spread of autocratic ideas and policies through various causal mechanisms – such as *learning*, emulation, persuasion, socialization, and others – shaped the post-2011 order. Whereas these mechanisms of diffusion are

distinctive in the lack of intentionality, the post-2011 uprisings unravelled other mechanisms of active diffusion. In their counter-diffusion endeavor, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states undertook several military interventions to shape transitions in Libya, Bahrain, and Yemen.

These military interventions¹ appear to conform to what some scholars have qualified as coercive mechanisms of

1 I adopt a wide definition of intervention allowing some variation in the purpose of intervention but also in the extent to which they aim to alter domestic institution in the target state. I therefore define a military intervention as an overt, short-term deployment of ground troops across international boundaries to influence the political outcome in another state. This definition follows Finnemore (2004, 9–10) and Saunders (2011,21).

autocratic diffusion (Ambrosio 2010; Braun and Gilardi 2006, 309–310). Scholars have traditionally included coercion as a mechanism of diffusion alongside learning, emulation, and competition. In contrast to these horizontal interdependencies that are at the core of diffusion literature, coercion emphasizes a top-down pressure. In other words, coercion is a mechanism of vertical diffusion that reflects a hierarchical interdependence between actors. Coercive diffusion is a process where powerful states explicitly or implicitly influence the probability that weaker nations will adopt the policies they prefer. This process aims to manipulate the opportunities and constraints encountered by target countries to stimulate policy change. In some instances, coercion takes a “soft” form, such as political or financial assistance. It can also take a “hard” approach, such as strings attached to financial assistance or the use of military force (Simmons, Dobbin, and Garrett 2006, 790–791). Accordingly, coercive mechanisms of autocratic diffusion reveal an intentional motive to support an existing authoritarian regime or to impose a preferred authoritarian regime or policy in a neighboring country.

Since the establishment of modern Arab states, inter-Arab interventions and interferences have shaped the international relations of the Middle East. Some of these interventions were driven by ideological rivalry in the context of the Arab Cold War, such as the Egyptian intervention in Yemen (1962-1967). Others were motivated by territorial claims and security concerns resulting from state formation dilemmas in the region – such as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (1961 and 1991), the Syrian occupation of Lebanon (1976-2005), and Jordan’s interventions in the West Bank. The use of military force by the GCC states in either supporting or undermining their fellow autocrats emerged as one of the most vexing autocratic strategies, bringing new dimensions to inter-Arab politics. Whereas the Saudi-led intervention in Bahrain exhibited an autocratic cooperation in support of the Al Khalifa regime, other interventions were driven by the willingness to topple opponent dictators while critically altering the domestic landscape of the countries under transition. For instance, the United Arab Emirates and

Qatar’s interventions in Libya, as well as the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, employed strategies to alter the existing authoritarian structures in these countries. While these interventions varied in the drivers and motives, the choice of a military strategy over other means of interference remains an underlying puzzle. Whereas military interventions were conducted in Bahrain, Yemen, and Libya, the indirect military effort was a strategic choice in Syria. Moreover, the Gulf states choose financial and diplomatic means elsewhere, namely in Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, and Morocco.

The use of military force as a coercive mechanism of autocratic diffusion in the post-2011 Middle East not only brings new insights to inter-Arab politics, but also illuminates a “blind spot” within the contemporary foreign policy debate on interventions. While the scholarship on interventions has been confined to those tasked with understanding the foreign behavior of democracies, and Great Powers in particular (Owen 2002; Krasner 1999; Owen 2010; Bull 1984; Saunders 2011) the most costly form of such interventions, between 1555 and 2000. I note several patterns in the data: these interventions come in three historical clusters; they are carried out by states of several regime types; states engage in the practice repeatedly; target states tend to be undergoing internal instability; states tend to promote their own institutions; and targets tend to be of strategic importance. The most intensive periods of promotion coincide with high transnational ideological tension and high international insecurity. I argue that these two conditions interact: forcible promotion is most likely when great powers (1, the post-2011 developments in the Middle East bring the authoritarian dimension to the study of interventions. This coercive mechanism of diffusion poses several questions. First, is the use of force a mere conflict initiation based on states’ security concerns or one that is driven by autocratic dynamics? Second, when and why do autocratic regimes decide to use military force among other interference strategies?

This memo examines the study of these emerging interventionist policies in the post-2011 Middle East in

light of theoretical debates within IR Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). It explores the existing scholarship on military interventions while identifying some gaps and avenues for future research. I argue that the scholarship on interventions is mostly structure-based and, hence, falls short of offering a systematic explanation of interventions as an autocratic coercive mechanism. Instead, the memo calls for more attention to the agency of leaders and their perceptions as well as decision-making structures.

Structural Explanations to Autocratic Interventionist Policies

Although the literature on autocratic military interventions is sparse compared to the upsurge in the literature on interventions by democracies, a small number of studies have explored the use of military force by autocracies in international relationships. Two explanations for the use of force stand out: one focused on its utility as a mere conflict initiation based on states' international security concerns and the other shaped by domestic factors, i.e. the nature of authoritarian politics.

The first strand in the literature belongs to neorealism in IR Theory. Neorealists argue that the anarchic international environment produces external threats and opportunities such as shifts in the relative capabilities or regional alignments. From this perspective, autocratic states are like democratic ones when they behave at the international levels. Scholarly interest in the GCC interventions has, for the most part, been approached through neorealist lenses of regional power interests and geopolitics (Young 2013). Accordingly, threat perception, shaped by power rivalry with Iran, constitutes the main driver behind these interventionist policies (Obaid 2015). These explanations cannot, however, unravel why the GCC states chose to intervene in some cases, such as Libya and Yemen, but not in others, Syria in particular. Furthermore, the nature of security threats is not obvious in many cases, such as Libya or Yemen. In short, these explanations account for neither the variation in interventions across cases nor the choice of military strategies over other means of interference.

Other domestic-level explanations have attempted to explain the aggressive international behavior of autocracies. One strand of research concludes that regime type and the structure of the elite in power answer why some autocracies are more belligerent than others. For example, Peceny and Butler (2004) argue that personalist dictatorships are more likely to recourse to the use of force. This argument builds on the selectorate theory of Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003). From this perspective, leaders' decision to go to war is dependent on their insulation from the ruling coalition. Another strand of the literature focuses on domestic institutions, arguing that autocracies be driven by domestic vulnerabilities. For instance, Lai and Slater (2006) find that military regimes are more likely than single-party regime to initiate international disputes as a diversionary strategy from domestic problems. In the same vein, Debs and Goemans (2010) show that leaders care about their own survival and seek to avoid punishment, such as death, exile, or imprisonment. The decision of war then becomes a gamble. Weeks (2012; 2014) also argues that to account for why some autocracies are more war-prone than others one must examine if leaders are constrained by domestic audiences. Building on this strand of literature, the GCC's interventions can be explained through the monarchical regime type or the lack of audience and accountability. Nevertheless, these domestic explanations do not account for the non-compliance of Oman with the intervention in Yemen or Qatar's willingness to diverge from GCC foreign policy positions in Libya and elsewhere.

Although this emerging literature has transcended the scholarly reading of authoritarian regimes as one category and taken into account their variety, the above explanations focus on either the structural nature of the regional system or the regime type. These slow-changing factors cannot explain how states approach interventions and why they choose military force over other strategies to shape domestic outcomes in neighboring countries. Moreover, while these scholarly efforts have proposed important hypotheses about autocracies and wars, they have focused on the initiation of international conflict. Yet scholars and policymakers have a poor understanding of

the incentives driving the use of military force as a coercive mechanism of autocratic diffusion, a particular type of conflict initiation. The use of military force in this context thereby constitutes a blind spot in our understanding of the foreign policy behavior of autocratic regimes in general and the emerging interventionist policies of the GCC in particular.

Agent-Based Approaches: The Way Forward?

The foreign policies of GCC states have often been the prerogative of the ruling families, their trusted individuals, based on tribal or family basis (Baabood 2003, 265–267). The dynamics of interventionist policies in the Middle East coincided with a generational shift in the leadership of GCC states – namely Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE – with new faces in the decision-making circles willing to take assertive and ambitious foreign policy decisions. This shift in leadership led to reshuffled ministries and changes within the close circle of ruling elite. These developments necessitate the incorporation of individual-level factors in the analysis. Although leaders operate within domestic and international structures, the cases show that leaders' individual characters have a significant influence on interventions and foreign policy decisions. This type of informal influence on the decision-making process needs to be thoroughly examined. How do leaders' perceptions, beliefs, personality traits, psychological biases, and political effectiveness shape interventionist policies? The crucial impact of individuals – leaders, members of the executive authority, and bureaucrats – on war and diplomacy in Middle Eastern international relations has been ignored and marginalized for decades, with few exceptions (M. Hermann et al. 2001; M. Hermann 1988; Malici and Buckner 2008).

Two strands of research within FPA constitute a potential ground for developing systematic insights about these autocratic military interventions. First is the poliheuristic theory of foreign policy. This approach argues that leaders often cut through the plethora of complex information available during the decision by employing cognitive shortcuts. In the meantime, leaders are concerned first and

foremost by their political survival (Kinne 2005). From this perspective, the use of military force in interventions can be related to threat perception and policy prioritization, but also includes the psychological factors influencing leaders' perceptions. The poliheuristic theory of foreign policy has, for instance, provided a potential explanation to the Gulf states' varied responses to the 2011 uprisings, either supporting or undermining fellow autocrats (Odinius and Kuntz 2015). By taking the decision-making process into account, this approach can account for the variation in the interventionist policies of the Gulf states.

The second cluster of research is the psychological approach in FPA, which includes a focus on personality traits, leaders' beliefs, analogies, framing, threat perception, misperception, and information processing in uncertainty (M. G. Hermann 1980; Jervis 1976; Levy 2003; Kaarbo 1997; Edelman 2002). As some of these interventionist policies evolved alongside a change in the leadership of the some Gulf states, it is important to pay attention to the goals and idiosyncrasies of this new generation of leaders. Like structural approaches to international relations, the first image does not provide all the answers. Yet, the study of the decision-making process and the role of individuals can be one part of a larger whole, and ignoring these can come at the determinant of a complex understanding of regional dynamics. Of course, recognizing the importance of these factors will make the scholarly endeavor more complex, due to the closed nature of authoritarian regimes. Such challenges, however, will result in a richer product that is better able to explain these contentious phenomena.

To summarize, recent interventions by the GCC states have been treated as *sui generis* cases, focusing on the foreign policies of individual cases rather than developing more generic or systematic insights on why and when authoritarian regimes intervene using military force as a coercive mechanism of autocratic diffusion. The GCC interventionist policies are examples of a wider pattern of new interventionism led by authoritarian states to shape transitions in their regions – for example, Russia's interventions in Ukraine and Syria (Leonard

2016). Developing agent-focused approaches to foreign policies of autocrats bears the potential of enriching our understanding of Middle Eastern international relations, and the aggressive conduct of autocracies in the Middle East and beyond.

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Regional Diffusion, Rentierism, and Authoritarianism in Turkey

Ahmet T. Kuru, San Diego State University

In a recent article, I explained disproportionate authoritarianism in 49 Muslim-majority countries with the combined effect of regional diffusion and oil-rich rentier states (Kuru, 2014). The recent de-democratization in Turkey has constituted a challenge for my argument, as it is both a candidate to world's most democratic regional organization (European Union) and an oil-poor country. This essay argues that regional diffusion and rentierism help us understand Turkey's puzzling political transformation.

Regional Diffusion and Rentier States

Rentier states are financially dependent on rents, such as oil and minerals and state control of these rents maintains the rulers' incentive and power to reject people's participation in governance. Rentier states have relatively limited need for taxation; instead, using rent revenues, they allocate money, jobs, and services to the people. This minimizes the people's power to keep their rulers accountable. The patron-client relationship between the rentier state and the people hinders the emergence of independent political, economic, and civil society. Instead, rents provide authoritarian regimes the financial capacity to use state-owned media and other propaganda instruments and to expand despotic security apparatuses.

My index of rentier states reveals that 25 out of 28 rentier states in the world are authoritarian. Muslim-majority countries constitute about three quarters (20/28) of all rentier states, although they are only a quarter (49/174) of all countries (Kuru, 2014: 415).

Other scholars have explained the impact of the oil rents on authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and worldwide (Beblawi and Luciani, 1987; Ross, 2001). Some recent publications, however, criticize the rentier state model by emphasizing that oil-poor countries in MENA and Central Asia are also authoritarian. A

regional diffusion perspective can fix this shortcoming of the rentier state model. Such a perspective takes rentierism as a region-wide phenomenon and explicates why even oil-poor countries in MENA and Central Asia are authoritarian. Rentier states promote authoritarianism in their non-rentier neighbors, especially if the former are numerically, economically, and politically dominant over the latter.

In other parts of the world, authoritarianism and democracy are also regional phenomena rather than isolated phenomena in separate countries. Political regimes in a region affect each other through military and diplomatic relations, financial interactions, and socio-cultural exchanges. Given these effects, the transitions to and consolidation of authoritarianism or democracy are largely regional processes, as seen in the following examples: a) the rise of fascism before World War II and democratization in its aftermath in Western Europe; b) the rise (1970s) and fall (1980s-1990s) of the military regimes in Latin America; and c) the dominance of communism following World War II and its collapse in 1989-1991 in Eastern Europe.

While analyzing transnational influences, Thomas Richter and André Bank elaborate on the difference between (relatively fuzzier) diffusion and (actor-based) cooperation (Richter and Bank, 2016). The rise of the Arab uprisings is an example of diffusion, primarily through transnational learning and emulation, whereas their downfall could be explained by interstate cooperation within two regional blocs. The two blocks are led by Saudi Arabia and Iran, two rentier autocracies. Saudi Arabia has led a Sunni monarchical bloc that includes the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Jordan. This bloc has perceived the regional mood toward democratization as a threat and tried to stop it. Their cooperation included intervention through coercion. Saudi Arabia and the UAE deployed 1,000 troops and 500 policemen, respectively, to Bahrain to support the

kingdom against the popular protests. Their cooperation also included patronage. These countries provided an approximately \$12 billion loan to the military regime in Egypt after the coup d'état ousted former President Muhammad Morsi. The rival bloc has been led by Iran and included the Maliki government in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon. This bloc has sustained the Assad regime in Syria by providing military and financial support (Kuru, 2015: 107-108).

While the Arab uprisings have mostly reproduced authoritarianism, Turkey has also experienced de-democratization and the establishment of a neo-patrimonial Tayyip Erdoğan regime.

Turkey: Regional Diffusion and Rentierism

In its first and second terms (2002-2011), the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government led by Erdoğan promised to create a truly competitive market economy. Following the 2011 elections, however, Erdoğan unapologetically moved to establish a rentier system. He centralized key economic decisions, by requiring his personal signature on such issues as mining permits and the selling of expensive public lands in Istanbul. The AKP redesigned legal requirements for government tenders in order to freely distribute them to its cronies. Using these crony capitalists, Erdoğan has strictly controlled the majority of Turkish TV channels and newspapers. Meanwhile, employing the justification of the constitutional principle of “social state,” the AKP provided financial aid to over 13 million citizens, turning most of them into loyal voters. Due to the heavy party propaganda, these voters perceived governmental aid as a result of AKP generosity (Özgür, 2014). In short, rentierism and patron-client relationship have become pivotal characteristics of the Erdoğan regime (Yildirim, 2015).

The surprising aspect of Erdoğan's rentier regime is that it is oil-poor. To solve this problem, Erdoğan has employed three strategies. First, he has taken advantage of the global conditions (e.g., the U.S. Central Bank's low-interest policy) to receive a substantial amount of loans. Turkey's total

international debt (both public and private) increased from \$130 billion in 2002 to \$408 billion in 2014 (World Bank, 2016). Erdoğan also made the biggest privatization campaign of Turkish history by selling public properties for more than \$50 billion. Second, Erdoğan has used lands, especially in Istanbul, as a source of rent. The popular reaction to Erdoğan's passion to turn Istanbul's green places into rent led to the Gezi protests in Summer 2013.

Last but not least, Erdoğan has confiscated and sold the properties of the businesspeople who did not pledge loyalty to him. In order to cover up the corruption probe that occurred in late 2013, Erdoğan has demonized an old ally, the Gülen (aka Hizmet) movement. Erdoğan confiscated the movement's bank, Bank Asya, and media outlets. He declared the movement a “terrorist” organization and seized the properties of several businesspeople affiliated with it. The estimated property of Akin İpek, one of such businesspeople, is over \$10 billion.

Erdoğan's establishment of an authoritarian rentier system has been associated with the decline of Western linkages to and leverage on Turkey.¹ Following their elections as the leaders of Germany and France, respectively, Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy reversed their predecessors' favorable policies on Turkey's EU membership bid, weakening EU's linkages there. Moreover, the recent refugee crisis created by civil wars in Syria and Iraq, has weakened the EU's leverage on Turkey. Thus, EU leaders have remained mostly silent while Erdoğan pursued authoritarian policies. The US policy was no different given the American need to Turkey's partnership in fight against ISIS.

During 2002-2011, the AKP was trying to make Turkey an EU member and EU norms of democratization and liberalization were diffusing into Turkey. Yet after 2011, given the impacts of his expanding power in Turkey and the euphoria of the “Arab Spring,” Erdoğan's aspirations shifted to become the leader of Arab countries, if not the

1 For the impacts of Western linkages and leverages on non-Western democratization, see Levitsky and Way, 2010.

entire “Muslim world.” Thus Erdoğan took some initiatives to weaken Western leverages on his new regime. He tried to integrate with Russia and China as alternatives to the West. He asked Putin twice to accept Turkey in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (which includes Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan). He also showed preference to China in a multi-billion dollar anti-missile system tender. Although Turkey’s downing of a Russian warplane created tension between the two countries and Erdoğan ultimately did not buy the Chinese anti-missile system, these maneuvers still damaged Turkey’s relations with the West.

Erdoğan’s attempts to weaken Turkey’s ties with Western countries have had strategic as well as ideological roots. Strategically, Erdoğan wanted to minimize both intervention and diffusion of Western countries in terms of promoting democracy and human rights. The marginal reaction from American and European politicians to Erdoğan’s crack down on dissenting politicians, businesspeople, and the media indicate that his strategy worked. Erdoğan has also worked hard to minimize Western diffusion to Turkish society via democratic learning and emulation. The TV channels and newspapers controlled and orchestrated by Erdoğan have pursued an unprecedented anti-Western campaign, by presenting such Western actors as German President Joachim Gauck, U.S. Prosecutor Preet Bharara, and U.S. think tank the Brookings Institute as enemies of and conspirators against Turkey. This successful campaign has deepened anti-Western sentiment and disseminated a fantasy that Erdoğan’s Turkey has become an enormously successful Muslim country, making the West jealous and increasing its enmity toward Turkey (Tas, 2014). The Erdoğan media depicted every critical report in the Western media about the problems of human right abuses and authoritarianism in Turkey as Western conspiracy.

Ideologically, Erdoğan’s Islamism is the genuine reason for his anti-Westernism. Although he had claimed to give up the Islamist ideology in 2002-2011 due to pressure by the assertive secularist military, once he consolidated power, Erdoğan returned to his Islamist roots. At home, he

Islamicized public discourse, marginalized Alevis, focused public education on the Islamic Imam-Hatip schools, and channeled public resources to crony Islamic foundations in order to train a “pious generation.” Abroad, he established close partnerships with such Islamist countries as Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Erdoğan’s cooperation with Saudi Arabia and Qatar has two main dimensions. First, Erdoğan has received substantial financial support from these two countries through foreign loans, direct investment, and property selling. Saudi Arabia and Qatar’s support for Erdoğan is “the subject of speculation regarding the huge mysterious inflow of unidentified foreign currency to Turkey during the years of AKP rule. The sum has reached an unprecedented \$36 billion in total, with the monthly inflows increasing especially during election time” (Doğan, 2015).

Second, Erdoğan has established military cooperation with Saudi Arabia and Qatar. These three armed several opposition groups, including the Al Qaeda-affiliate El Nusra Front, against the Assad regime in Syrian Civil War. More recently, Turkey joined to Saudi Arabia’s anti-Iranian “Islamic Army,” and built a military base in Qatar.

In addition to cooperation, Erdoğan has emulated some characteristics of his new Arab partners. His palace built from scratch in the middle of Atatürk Forest Farm in Ankara symbolizes the combination of Erdoğan’s rentier attitude toward parks and his emulation of Saudi-like luxury. Erdoğan has also made the National Intelligence Organization the central institution of his regime, similar to Arab *mukhabarat* (intelligence) states.

In short, recent political decisions have made Turkey more distant from democratic Europe and closer to authoritarian MENA. The closer Turkey becomes to the MENA states, the more authoritarian it becomes, and vice-versa. Similarly, a mutual causal relationship seems to exist between Turkey’s deteriorating relations with Western countries and its fading democracy.

This essay has explained the recent authoritarianism in Turkey by the combined effects of regional diffusion and rentierism. Although Turkey is an oil-poor country, Erdoğan has established a rentier system using foreign debt, privatization revenues, Istanbul's lands, and properties of opposition businesspeople. In this rentier system, Erdoğan's role models are his authoritarian neighbors. Turkey's recent transformation from democracy to authoritarianism has been associated with its moving away from Western countries and closer relations with MENA. The future democratization of Turkey requires it to turn the rentier economic system into a competitive, free market system, and to reestablish close relations with Western countries. These two requirements are mutually supportive and jointly necessary for Turkey to become democratic again.

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Did Egypt's coup teach Ennahda to cede power?

By Monica Marks, University of Oxford

On January 28, 2014, just two days after signing Tunisia's new constitution into law, Prime Minister Ali Laarayedh handed power to a caretaker government of unelected technocrats. It was a symbolic moment, as Laarayedh – a leading member of Tunisia's center right Islamist party, Ennahda, who was imprisoned and badly tortured before the revolution – abdicated power on behalf of the Ennahda-led coalition that won Tunisia's first free and fair elections in October 2011.

Watching from afar, some observers read Ennahda's decision to abdicate power – following months of political crisis, negotiation, and pressure from opposition parties and civil society groups – as a classic example of political learning, a bi-product of the July 3, 2013 coup that toppled Ennahda's cousin party in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood, and sent its leaders back into jail. In this reading, Tunisia's Ennahda – presumed to have followed a stubbornly hegemonic approach before Egypt's coup – was essentially spooked into ceding power by the undemocratic ouster and subsequent re-imprisonment of co-Islamists in Egypt. Some observers suggested Ennahda's abdication represented a mere strategic adaptation; others thought Ennahda may have internalized the lessons of Egypt more deeply. Yet they shared the assumption that Egypt's coup – rather than lessons gleaned from Ennahda's own history and political context – triggered its abdication.

So did Ennahda cede power in January 2014 because it had “learned” from Egypt's July 2013 coup? The short answer is no. The longer answer is that although Ennahda didn't abdicate *because* of the coup (it was more compelled by its own historical experiences, the example of Algeria in 1990-1991, and domestic pressure from political opponents and civil society activists), that doesn't mean the coup didn't matter. In fact, Ennahda watched the Egypt coup closely and felt its impact deeply. Instead of learning new lessons from the Brotherhood's ouster, though, the coup reinforced old lessons, increasing the degree of confidence

Ennahda invested in survivalism, gradualism, and long-term oriented pragmatism as strategically advantageous approaches.¹

The importance of history and Ennahda's own experience

Ennahda wasn't learning new lessons from the Egypt coup. In fact, the coup represented a story Ennahda's leaders had heard many times before – of electorally triumphant Islamists beaten back by authoritarian establishments, often with the West's tepid blessing. In fact, Ennahda had found itself as the credulous Islamist protagonist in one of the first editions of that story: Tunisia's 1989 elections, when the country's now-deposed dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali reneged on promises to initiate a democratic opening. Ennahda fielded independent candidates in the 1989 elections, optimistic this opening, or so-called *changement*, was on its way. But before the election could be completed, Ben Ali – startled by the Islamists' strong showing – did an abrupt about-face, using the candidates' names to single out and imprison party supporters.²

Many *nahdawis* (Ennahda members) fled for exile, mostly to Western European countries. Thousands more remained in Tunisia, where many were jailed as political prisoners during the 1990s and early 2000s. The Ben Ali regime also subjected Ennahda members and their families to various forms of human rights abuse, such as blacklisting them from employment and educational opportunities, requiring them to register at police stations up to five times per day – a practice that greatly interfered with working, studying, and otherwise leading a normal life – and police harassment that sometimes involved sexual abuse, rape,

1 See Monica Marks, “Tunisia's Ennahda: Rethinking Islamism in the context of ISIS and the Egyptian coup,” Brookings *Rethinking Political Islam Series*, forthcoming with Oxford University Press, 2016

2 See Larbi Sadiki, *Political Liberalization in Bin Ali's Tunisia: Facade Democracy, Democratization*, 2002; Emma Murphy, *Economic and Political Change in Tunisia: from Bourguiba to Ben Ali*, Palgrave, 1999.

and torture for both men and women.³

Over the coming years Ennahda leaders thought hard about how they should have handled the 1989 elections and surrounding events. Which represented the wisest path vis-à-vis the Ben Ali regime: accommodation or confrontation? Ennahda leaders' opinions were divided on this question throughout much of the 1990s and 2000s. Yet one thing most of the leadership agreed on was that nahdawis needed to be shrewd and long-term in their thinking – strategic minimalists willing to go gradually rather than overeager maximalists who overplay their political hand.

Another touchstone moment that shaped Ennahda leaders gradualist approach was the experience of neighboring Algeria following its 1990 and 1991 elections. The Islamic Salvation Front's (FIS) dominance in those elections spooked Algeria's existing military regime, which responded by cancelling elections and cracking down on Islamists. Algeria's experience and the bloody, decade-long civil war that ensued powerfully impacted Ennahda's thinking during the 1990s and 2000s. Survival, Ennahda leaders surmised, meant stepping slowly and strategically, careful to reassure vested interests and society at large it had no intentions of seizing the levers of state to impose a radical majoritarian version of Islamism.

In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) failed to internalize the lessons of Algeria. The Brotherhood, to be fair, was dealt a difficult hand: squeezed by Egypt's judiciary and elements of its military apparatus, its electoral success did not translate into clear control of the political system. Yet the FJP failed to play the cards it did have wisely. Instead of stepping slowly and strategically through the complex entanglement that was Egyptian transitional politics, the FJP opted to double down in its attempts to assert authority. As in Algeria, powerful demonstrations of Islamist force fueled

opposition rhetoric, providing just the window Egypt's military needed to resume full control of the political system. In Tunisia, however, Ennahda leaders practiced more restraint.

Regularly referencing the experience of FIS in Algeria, Ennahda leaders remained sensitive to suspicions that Islamists would instrumentalize electoral victory as a means towards illiberal, majoritarian dominance. Ennahda therefore adopted a more minimalist approach and, unlike the Brotherhood, stayed true to its pre-election promises of supporting coalition governments and not running or officially endorsing presidential candidates in 2011 and again in 2014. Drawing on lessons it had learned from its own experiences and from Algeria's history, Ennahda leaders expressed frustration with the Brotherhood before its ouster. "In Egypt the Ikhwan made the worst decision," said Osama Essaghir, an Ennahda MP and member of the party's 150-member Shura Council.⁴ "They decided to govern alone."

One president, all alone with the powers... That was very unwise. The day after [Brotherhood member Mohamed] Morsi won the [presidential] election, Sheikh Rached [Ghannouchi] flew to Egypt for one reason, just to tell Morsi one thing: do *not* govern alone.⁵

The importance of chronology

The coup in Egypt didn't "teach" Ennahda to cede power. Rather, Ennahda's willingness to strike canny, survivalist compromises – an approach that came to dominate Ennahda's strategic orientation after the revolution – had its origins in lessons party leaders started internalizing decades earlier. Getting the chronology correct is an essential first step to determine how and whether learning has occurred. In this case, Ennahda's decision to abdicate power in January 2014 was preceded by a string of

3 Author interviews, 2011-2016. See also Doris Gray, *Islamist & Secular Quests for Women's Rights*, *Mediterranean Politics* 17:3, 2012 and Tunisia reports from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ)

4 The 150-member Shura Council is the highest regularly sitting body in Ennahda. It is intended to be a representative institution in which the party debates and decides positions on important issues via a one person, one vote scheme.

5 Osama Essaghir in discussion with author, March 20, 2013.

experiences that reinforced the value of compromise to party leaders.

Participation in cross-ideological opposition talks throughout the 2000s positively reinforced that dialogue and compromise were effective steps toward achieving the longer-term goal of weakening Ben Ali's regime. Parties to opposition talks in Aix-en-Provence (2003) and Rome (2005), for example, included secular and Islamist activists, human rights groups, and political actors. Together, they forged a shared understanding of the democratic principles Tunisia's polity should affirm. These principles included commitments to an inclusive political system that would work to realize equality (*musawa*) between men and women, and in which popular sovereignty (*sayadet al-shaab*) would constitute the sole source of legitimacy. These talks dovetailed with the formation of a cross-ideological opposition movement, the October 18 Collective, which helped weaken and delegitimize Ben Ali's rule.⁶

Meanwhile in England, an exiled Rached Ghannouchi was laying intellectual underpinnings of Ennahda's compromise-centric approach. Some of the lessons Ghannouchi learned in England bore immediate fruit following his return to Tunisia. Months before Tunisia's October 2011 elections, for example, Ghannouchi correctly predicted that employing a Westminster style first past the post system (FPTP) would result in a coalition and democracy-inhibiting landslide victory for Ennahda. Instead, he and other Ennahda leaders supported a proportional representation (PR) system most beneficial to smaller parties. This reduced Ennahda's own share of votes in the 2011 election by a staggering 50 percent. Had Ennahda's leaders successfully advocated an FPTP system, the party would have won approximately 90 percent of votes as opposed to 40 percent – an outcome party leaders feared would have spooked secularists and old regime forces, repeating a Tunisia 1989 or Algeria 1991-style

6 See Monica Marks, "Purists vs. Pluralists: Cross-Ideological Coalition Building in Tunisia," in Alfred Stepan, ed. *Tunisia's Democratic Transition in Comparative Perspective*, Columbia University Press, forthcoming 2016.

scenario likely to jeopardize Ennahda's survival and Tunisia's entire democratic transition.⁷

Other core compromise-centric positions were taken before Egypt's coup. Months before Tunisia's October 2011 election, Ennahda vowed that, even if it won an outright majority, it would govern in an inclusive coalition – an arrangement party leaders explained would help stabilize Tunisia at a fragile time of transition. Ennahda won a plurality rather than a majority in the 2011 election and was therefore structurally obliged to go into coalition, but its pre-electoral statements about the importance of compromise evinced a much deeper understanding of democratic politics than the Egyptian Brotherhood's.

Similarly, chronology demonstrates that the bulk of Ennahda's constitutional compromises had been worked out in fall 2012 and spring 2013, months before the June 2013 coup in Egypt. Indeed, compromises on core issues – such as omitting any reference to sharia, defining men and women as equal rather than complementary, and omitting language that would have criminalized blasphemy – were already written into the third draft of Tunisia's constitution, released in April 2013.⁸

The drafting process itself proved an important experience of learning for Ennahda, as the party struggled – for the very first time – not just to govern, but also to somehow translate its abstractly Islamist aims into concrete constitutional language. Along the way, leftist and secularly oriented segments of Tunisian society – demographics that are much larger in Tunisia than in Egypt, Algeria and many other Arab countries – taught Ennahda valuable lessons about the importance of consensual support. Determined and vocal pushback from such citizens – backed by

7 Author interviews, 2011-2016. See also Alfred Stepan, "Tunisia's Transition and the Twin Tolerations," *Journal of Democracy*, April 2012 and John M. Carey, "Why Tunisia Remains the Arab Spring's Best Bet," conference presentation at Dartmouth College, September 9-11, 2013 accessible at http://sites.dartmouth.edu/jcarey/files/2013/08/Tunisia-Carey-Aug_2013.pdf

8 See Draft Constitution of the Tunisian Republic, April 22 2013, International IDEA translation accessible at <http://constitutionaltransitions.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Tunisia-third-draft-Constitution-22-April-2013.pdf>

well-networked Tunisian civil society groups – resulted in a series of street protests and media critiques against Ennahda. At critical junctures when more maximalist elements of the party reared up, civil society appeared to batten them back behind the parapet.

In its opposition, civil society often found itself in frequent alliance with an anti-Islamist coalition of leftists, trade unionists, and old regime elites. This constellation of soft and hard-power anti-Islamist actors narrowed Ennahda's margin of maneuver, further impressing upon party leaders the importance of canny compromise to long-term survival.

Intense pushback from local, Tunisian critics – including media, civil society groups, the labor union (UGTT) and old regime elites – during 2012 and early 2013 often served to remind Ennahda that minimalist pragmatism, with a heavy helping of consensus and compromise-making, offered the path of least resistance.

Updating as learning

Though Ennahda didn't learn new lessons from the Egypt coup, it still learned – albeit in the academic sense. The definition of political learning used most commonly by academics describes learning as “a change of beliefs (or the degree of confidence in one's beliefs) or the development of new beliefs, skills, or procedures as a result of observation and interpretation of experience.”⁹ Ennahda learned from the coup according to the first part of that definition, not the second. In other words, the experience of Egypt's coup updated rather than created Ennahda's existing posture of pragmatism, because it reinforced most Ennahda leaders' confidence that pragmatic gradualism represented the wisest approach.

To be sure, the coup and its aftermath – especially the massacre at Rab'a Adawiya in Cairo, which killed approximately one thousand people, most of them

Brotherhood supporters, in August 2013 – sickened and scared Ennahda members and party leaders. Despite having often acknowledged the Brotherhood's mistakes in power, *nahdawis* felt its mistakes merited neither the coup nor the crackdown. Some said Rab'a stood as a gut-churning reminder of the oppression they and their families experienced under Ben Ali. A huge number of *nahdawis* at every level of the party changed their Twitter and Facebook photos to the yellow Rab'a symbol. Some began wearing yellow Rab'a pins and stickers to demonstrate their solidarity with victims.

There may well have been a form of emotional learning in which strongly felt visceral reactions – fear, sympathy, disgust – made Ennahda's base more willing to accept previously unthinkable political compromises. The most powerful example here is Ennahda's ultimate decision – much opposed by the party's base – to vote down an electoral lustration law that would have banned former members of Ben Ali's party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) from contesting Tunisia's 2014 elections. The law, tabled by CPR in 2012, was debated off and on before finally being voted down – amidst much pushback from large swathes of the base and many Ennahda MPs – in accordance with the wishes of Ennahda's central executive leadership, including party president Rached Ghannouchi.

It is likely that learning from the Egypt coup, much of it powerfully emotional, played a role in shaping *nahdawis'* ultimate compromise on the lustration law – a proposal party leaders feared would have created a strong constituency for a coup in Tunisia. Other sources of learning, though – such as the spectacular failure of Libya's attempted lustration law historical lessons drawn from Ennahda's and Algeria's experiences – were likely more powerful influences on party leaders, however, and also factored into base-level *nadhawis'* views on lustration legislation.

Yet overall the emotions following Rab'a reaffirmed Ennahda's existing approach to governance that rested on canny compromise and a malleable message of cultural conservatism. The coup in Egypt had a powerful

9 See Jack S. Levy, “Learning and foreign policy: sweeping a conceptual minefield,” *International Organization* 48:2, 1994

demonstration effect – one that, while not new to Ennahda given its own experiences and the example of Algeria, reinforced and offered new justification for Ennahda’s pragmatic compromise-centric approach.

It is therefore ahistorical to characterize Ennahda’s compromises, particularly its decision to formally relinquish power in January 2014, as mere byproducts of Egypt’s 2013 coup. Ennahda’s logic of long termism and track record of cross-ideological compromise indicate that its leadership’s operative logics have been crucially different than the Brotherhood’s. A series of experiences,

both before and after Tunisia’s revolution, taught Ennahda the value of canny compromise and malleable conservatism. These tendencies manifest in Ennahda’s historical negotiations and internal evolution, as well as the key compromises it made after the 2011 elections. Rather than teaching Ennahda to compromise, or spooking it into ceding power, Egypt’s 2013 coup justified – with dramatic demonstration effect – lessons Ennahda had already learned, reinforcing pre-existing postures of pragmatism and gradualism that have been crucial to Ennahda’s survival in Tunisian society.



Diffusion Mechanisms as Stepping Stones: Qualitative Evidence from Syria

Wendy Pearlman, Northwestern University

At the macro-level, the sudden and rapid spread of protest across the Middle East in 2011 leaves little doubt about the importance of transnational diffusion in the making of what came to be known as the Arab spring. At the micro-level, however, questions remain about the mechanisms through which that diffusion occurred. In this essay I pull upon original interviews with Syrian oppositionists to call attention to mechanisms that are emotional or behavioral more than strictly rationalist and thus encourage us to think about diffusion as operating through gradualist processes other than rationalist updating.

This argument diverges from a conventional approach to protest cascades that focuses on how early risers make available new information that alters followers’ utility calculations. Applied to the Arab uprisings, this perspective suggests that the forced resignation of an authoritarian president in Tunisia led citizens elsewhere to rationally rethink the probability that anti-regime protest

could be mobilized and/or succeed in their own countries. Kurt Weyland adapts this approach with the important caveat that individual rationality is distorted by reliance on cognitive shortcuts.¹ Heuristics such as availability and representativeness thus led those who went to the streets after Tunisia’s revolt to overestimate prospects for replicating its success.

These arguments, building from deductive principles about human decision-making, go far in explaining diffusion dynamics. Research that proceeds inductively from Arab oppositionists’ reflections on their experiences, however, brings other processes to the fore. This is what I find based upon open-ended interviews that I have conducted with more than 250 displaced Syrians in Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon from 2012-16, the overwhelming majority of whom are opposed to the regime of Bashar al-Assad. My interviews affirm the critical impact of precursor revolts for Syrians’ path to protest. Yet my results yield mixed

support for claims about (boundedly) rationalist updating. I frequently asked Syrian rebellion supporters if, upon learning about uprisings in other Arab countries, they believed there would be an uprising in Syria, as well. Some voiced opinions that directly resonated with Weyland's argument, as did this then-recent college graduate from the Damascus suburbs:

When the events happened in Tunisia and Ben Ali fled, it looked so easy. Then Egypt happened – only 17 days! Our path was open in front of us. Freedom and dignity were going to come. I predicted 30-60 days. Tunisia took one day. Egypt took 17 days. Let Syria take 60 days.²

Others expressed an adamantly contrary opinion. Another recent graduate from a different Damascus suburb insisted:

I said, it's impossible, impossible, impossible to have a revolution in Syria, because I know the meaning of the oppression and fear inside people. The oppression we had in Syria didn't exist in any country where they had revolutions. Not in Egypt or Tunisia or Libya ... We couldn't even say the president's name in any conversation, even in a positive way. No one dared to talk about him.³

In my conversations, I found that even people close to each other sometimes expressed divergent views on the likelihood of Syria's emulating other countries' example. One married couple from Daraa recalled:

Husband: When the revolutions happened in Tunisia and Egypt, I immediately thought that the same would happen here. Because we are all under pressure – in every Arab country, and especially Syria. (*To his wife*), Do you remember when I said that?

Wife: Yes. And I thought the opposite. I said it's impossible to have a revolution here. People are simple. They just want to live. And we know that [if there were demonstrations], the regime would react with violence. There would be blood.

Husband: And I said no. People won't be silent ... People are going to go out.⁴

These individuals, far from showing an unthinking bias toward exaggerating the applicability of the Tunisian or Egyptian models, engaged in a keen reading of opportunities and risks much closer to home. A man who left Syria as a child provided further illustration of this attention to local circumstances:

It started with the Tunisian Revolution. We felt that ... something big was happening because we know that there are a lot of similarities between Tunisia and Syria. We said everything that is causing the revolution in Tunisia also exists in Syria.

But I also felt that we have two things that could delay revolution in Syria. One is what I call the memory of blood: the memory of what happened in the '80s. We still feel it. We don't want to get back to that time. The other thing is the sectarian problem. That complicates everything. The army in Tunisia and in Egypt played a big role in making the change. But in Syria, we felt that army would not do that ... Most of the generals and the high ranking [officers] are from the Alawi community, and most of them are loyal to the Assad family. And nobody wants to get into a sectarian war.⁵

If it was not strictly a recalculation of costs and benefits that propelled transnational diffusion to Syria, what did? One pattern emerging across my interviews is oppositionists' sense that they felt actively engaged in the Arab uprisings that preceded their own, and this engagement served as something of a stepping-stone in their path to public protest against their own regime.

For some, this stepping-stone was primarily emotional. Emotions are noninstrumental, subjective, evaluative experiences that infuse how people define interests, influence how they assess information, and trigger particular action tendencies. Elsewhere I argue that emotions such as anger, joy, and pride played an important role in driving individuals' participation in the revolts

in Tunisia and Egypt.⁶ The displays of defiance in those countries likewise triggered emotional reactions among citizens in other Arab countries, including Syria. Many Syrians with whom I spoke described how the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt helped them “break through” the barriers of fear that theretofore had discouraged them from political criticism. A man from rural Idlib describes:

It started with Bouazizi. We can consider the kids of Daraa a spark, but they are not the foundation. Bouazizi is the foundation.

People in our Arab countries are scared of the president more than God ... But when ... I saw Zine al-Abdine tell the Tunisian people, “I understand you” and then run away ... I can’t forget that. That’s when the barrier of fear started to break for me. When I saw that, there was no more fear. Because he was humiliated. We didn’t see the tyranny in him anymore.⁷

This sense of breaking through fear was a crucial part of a process of increasingly defiant action. Though this emotional reaction might have existed alongside a rational updating about the utility of protest, it was not reducible to it. An engineer of Golani origin recalled how early Arab uprisings set in motion a gradual process of emotional emboldening in his community:

The forced resignation of Zine al-Abdine Ben Ali from Tunisia was like a fantasy. It was a dream. I was one of the people in Syria who had tears in his eyes. People just couldn’t believe it ... It seemed like a miracle from God ... We wondered: could a revolution happen in another country, too? Most people thought it was impossible.

Tunisia did not have as big a psychological impact as Egypt did ... There were some guys who didn’t sleep at night. They followed the news nonstop. All day long: Egypt, Egypt, Egypt.

When it was announced that Mubarak had resigned

... Wow, I remember that day ... People in Syria were so happy inside. The state did not want to make any conflicts in the street. So people went outside, and they walked around and started to talk ... People didn’t talk about Bashar. But inside, they wanted their own revolution, too. Outwardly, they just talked about Egypt. Inside they were moved, and had other thoughts.

And then there began other revolutions, in Yemen and Libya, for example ... And the push became even bigger for something to happen in Syria ... I’d be sitting with five or six people and we’d say, “What is the situation? What are we going to do?”⁸

For these individuals, engagement with other Arab revolts generated an enthusiasm and hopefulness that prepared or propelled them in the direction of protest at home. A writer from Aleppo articulated a different emotional mechanism through which those uprisings motivated him toward open dissent against his own regime:

When the revolution began in Egypt, we lived it day by day. We were on Facebook giving Egyptians advice and sharing revolutionary songs, and things like that. We felt like we were in the Square with them.

Then the first protest occurred in Daraa. I wrote a Facebook status in support of the protest, but didn’t hit “enter” to share it. I was scared. My fingers were on the keyboard. Finally, I told myself that it was shameful that I was sharing stuff to support revolution in Egypt, but when the same things were happening in my country, I was too afraid to do anything. So I finally hit “enter.” I went to bed sure that the regime’s people were going to arrest me the next morning.

Whether colored by exuberance or shame, long-distance engagement with other uprisings thus may have served as an emotional stepping-stone in some Syrians’ personal route to protest. Apart from this, engagement with those uprisings could induce behavioral changes that increased their network-embeddedness and protest-readiness in

other ways. One of the speakers cited earlier suggested this from his experience:

For me, that time [after the revolt in Tunisia] ... was when I got involved in social media. Before that, I had refused ... I'm in my thirties and [Facebook] was more for the younger generation. But at that moment, I started to use my Facebook account and I opened a twitter account. I started to use them actively and get a lot of my news from that medium.⁹

Finally, apart from triggering emotional shifts or expanding online networks, uprisings in other countries also sparked actual protest events that functioned as critical stepping-stones in the Syrian groundswell. In February 2011, some Syrians held vigils outside the Egyptian and Libyan embassies in solidarity with those countries' revolts. One young Damascene describes the significance of these gatherings for him personally, and for what he saw as the launch of rebellion in Syria:

My brother went to the protest at the Egyptian embassy ... So when the Libyan embassy protest happened, I decided to go.

I came a little late. There was this girl holding a candle. It was melting all over her hand, but she just kept chanting against Qadhafi. I thought, Wow!

[The regime] didn't want us to protest ... The embassy was surrounded by security guards and they were recording everyone's faces. I was a little afraid, but at the same time, I was so happy, because I wasn't running away.

Later, I called my brother in Saudi Arabia. I told him that we went to the protest and I was chanting "Freedom, Freedom." I was so happy, I felt like I needed to tell him about it. [I said]: "You have to

experience this." I can't describe it ... It was like letting all the energy out of you, all the things you'd kept hidden for so many years...

Some people say the start of the revolution was March 15th. But by then ... protest wasn't a new thing for me. I don't think about that as the beginning. Because before that, there was the Egyptian embassy and the Libyan embassy.¹⁰

The testimonials discussed in this essay affirm that the revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and elsewhere were indispensable in activating revolt in Syria. Yet in the wake of those events, some Syrians came to believe that revolution was imminent in their country while others remained convinced that mass protest was impossible. Rather than immediately impelling people to change their forecasts about the probability or utility of protest, therefore, uprisings elsewhere might have had their greatest impact by emboldening Syrians emotionally, opening them to new information networks, or pushing them to engage in new forms of dissent online or on the streets. I have conceptualized these shifts as psychological or behavioral stepping-stones and propose that they represent micro-mechanisms distinct from rationalist updating.

The qualitative data interpreted here is admittedly anecdotal. Still, open-ended interviews with those who have participated in or witnessed uprisings can build our understanding of the mechanisms by which protest diffuses across borders, helping us both think critically about existing arguments and generate new ones. Deductive approaches to research are irreplaceable for translating theory into hypotheses and testing them against empirical data. Yet inductive approaches such as the one used here are also critical for uncovering complex motivations and nuanced relationships that abstract generalizations about human behavior often overlook.

Notes

(Endnotes)

- 1 Kurt Weyland, "The Arab Spring: Why the Surprising Similarities with the Revolutionary Wave of 1848?" *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (December 2012), pp. 917-934.
- 2 Author interview, Gaziantep, Turkey, October 4, 2013.
- 3 Author interview, Amman, Jordan, August 16, 2013.
- 4 Author interview, Ramtha, Jordan, October 6, 2012.
- 5 Author interview, Amman, Jordan, October 16, 2012.
- 6 Wendy Pearlman, "Emotions and the Microfoundations of the Arab Uprisings," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (June 2013), pp. 387-409.
- 7 Author interview, Reyhanlı, Turkey, September 16, 2013.
- 8 Author interview, Amman, Jordan, September 16, 2012.
- 9 Author interview, Amman, Jordan, October 16, 2012.
- 10 Author interview, Istanbul, Turkey, March 22, 2016.



International Social Agents and Norm Diffusion: the Case of LGBTQ Rights in Morocco

Merouan Mekouar, York University

On June 2nd 2015, two French members of the feminist collective Femen organized a gay kiss-in front of a mosque located in Morocco's capital city, Rabat. After inviting a group of local journalists, the two women removed their shirts and showed their naked torsos on which pro-gay slogans were written. For one of the two activists, the purpose of the "shock-action" was to spark a conversation on LGBTQ rights in the country by creating an "iconographic platform that would speak to people both within and outside Morocco (E., personal interview, May 3, 2016)." A month earlier, during a concert organized in the same city, the bassist of the British rock band Placebo also publicly denounced Morocco's anti-gay legislation by displaying the crossed out number 489 (relating to the article in the Moroccan penal code criminalizing homosexuality) on his guitar. These actions follow others initiated by international artists or transnational advocacy organizations that all attempt to induce change in the LGBTQ legislation in the country by publicly denouncing Morocco's anti-gay legislation or lobbying the government to overturn anti-gay verdicts (HRW 2007).

This essay attempts to examine the following question: can foreign social agents nourish learning (Richter and Bank 2016) and induce norm diffusion? If so, what characteristics do they need to have in order to exert an impact on the general public? Using the case of transnational advocacy networks¹ that attempt to promote and defend Western LGBTQ norms in Morocco, the first part will show that, in line with Massad (2007), actions taken by social agents deemed foreign or culturally alien are largely misread by the general public and are often counterproductive. The second part will show how international actors can actually enact norm diffusion if perceived as legitimate or culturally close by the general public.

¹ See Keck and Sikkink (1998) for a broader analysis of the logic of transnational activist groups.

Western Social Agents: All Gain, No Pain

While Moroccan LGBTQ activists were involved in careful work to raise awareness about LGBTQ issues (particularly the fact that sexual orientation is not a choice), Femen's bold action sent an ambiguous signal to the intended audience and created new and largely negative associations in the minds of the Moroccan public. For Mina, a 35 year-old LGBTQ advocate in Rabat "even the folks who never heard about Femen before, suddenly learned all about them. Worse, they associated LGBTQ rights with the actions of the movement," (Mina, personal interview, April 6, 2016). The defense of LGBTQ rights was associated with a number of negative stereotypes ranging from being anti-religious and promiscuous to being part of a large Western conspiracy aimed at breaking the social fabric of the country. For Hicham, a 30-year old gay man from Meknes:

the action taken by the Femen was a provocation (...), it was really an imposition of other people's view and a dangerous one at that, as it could nourish more aggressive reactions from people who disagree. (Hicham, personal interview, April 23, 2016).

Similarly for Ali, a young gay man:

regardless of the nature of their action, the Femen are people from the outside. Instead of seeing that they defend LGBTQ rights, people [Moroccans] only see that they are foreigners. (Ali, personal interview, April 23, 2016).

For Seif-Eddine, a Moroccan gay man in Paris:

the action of the Femen put the LGBTQ question on the map. For conservatives, the message was, 'oh, they [members of the LGBTQ community] exist, so we need to get rid of them' (personal interview, May 2, 2016).

Although members of Morocco's LGBTQ community recognize the need for change, they knew the general public would perceive the signal sent by foreign activists as a Western provocation. Partly because they were conducted without support from local organizations, actions taken by Western groups and personalities in favor of LGBTQ rights did lead to the opposite of the intended result. On the day following the kiss-in action in Rabat for instance, 1500 people congregated in front of the French embassy to denounce the Femen and the perceived Western support of the action. From then on for Mina, "gays were hunted everywhere (...) two guys who took selfies at the location where the Femen did their kiss-in were accused of being gay and outed on national television," (personal interview, April 6, 2016) and were later jailed under the provision of article 489. Following the events, one magazine published a cover with the title "Should we burn the gays" before the issue was banned by the authorities (MEE 2015). A few months later, one popular online personality published a video mocking the two Femen activists watched by close to 500,000 people, the vast majority of whom condemned the action of the two women and engaged in gay-bashing. The video was published as a number of anti-gay incidents were occurring all over the country, the most publicized of which was the gruesome arrest and beating of two men arrested by their neighbors in the city of Beni-Mellal and jailed because they were allegedly engaged in same-sex activities. Actions conducted by Western activists also prompted the state to crackdown on the small spaces of relative freedom that local activists had previously been able to secure. As summarized by Seifeddine, "the state has bigger fish to fry but has to pretend that it is tackling the question," (personal interview, May 2, 2016). Because the authorities are afraid that the more conservative fringes of society will use foreign actions as a pretext to challenge the state, the authorities feel that they have to tighten the application of the social provisions of the penal code.

Even for the more politicized members of Morocco's LGBTQ community, actions taken by Western activists occur from a platform of privilege with which they cannot identify. Local activists know that the foreign citizenship

of international activists renders them largely immune from state prosecution. As such, local activists also know that their Western counterparts are for more willing to engage in ill-conceived "shock-actions" that have little or no cost for them but might have serious consequences for the more vulnerable members of the Moroccan LGBTQ community. For one Femen activist, "the fact that we are Western women is part of the operation," (E., personal interview, May 3, 2016). Perhaps more disturbingly, Femen activists seemed to have been aware of the consequences of their actions on the more vulnerable members of the LGBTQ community whose rights they claimed to represent. For E., "we accepted the risk that the more vulnerable are the ones who will bear the brunt of state repression (...) unfortunately; they are collateral damage."

Diffusion through Regional Relays

If protest actions by Western advocacy groups are counterproductive (Massad 2007), could actions by other international groups or personalities with different characteristics help promote LGBTQ rights in countries like Morocco?

In line with the literature on diffusion (Lohmann 1994, Kricheli, Livne and Magaloni 2011, Mekouar 2014; 2016), for diffusion to occur, social agents must have certain characteristics – the most important of which is that they need to be perceived as generally moderate or mainstream by the general public. The closer social agents are to the political or social equilibrium of the population, the more impact their message has with the general population.

Thus, recent actions taken by prominent regional figures in North Africa and the Middle East might have more resonance with the public and might foster a new dynamic around LGBTQ rights in the region. One case in point is a statement by Salman al-Ouda, a respected senior Saudi cleric, generally thought to be conservative who declared² to a Swedish newspaper that:

² Before nuancing his statement few days later after facing a barrage of criticism.

even though homosexuality is considered a sin in all the Semitic holy books, it does not require any punishment in this world (...) Homosexuality is a grave sin, but those who say that homosexuals deviate from Islam are the real deviators (MEE 2016).

Another respected public figure who came strongly in favor of LGBTQ rights is former Tunisian Prime Minister Rached Ghannouchi, the head of Tunisia's Islamic Party Ennahda, who called to decriminalize homosexual relations and protect LGBTQs. The statement followed other similar statements made by members of the Muslim Brotherhood exiled in the UK (Alyomnew 2015).

While it is difficult to assess the impact of these statements, it remains clear that they have the ability to trigger a conversation, as their authors cannot be automatically dismissed as foreign agents³. Similarly for one interviewee, actions by respected local actors might change things in the future:

there are no respected, admired gay personalities who are open about their sexuality. There are no Arab or Muslim role-models that members of the Moroccan LGBTQ community can identify with. We see Americans, Europeans, Latin Americans, but no Arabs (personal interview, May 2, 2016).

Conclusion

According to a Femen activist interviewed for this work, "the Femen wanted to be there because local actors could not," (Gala, personal interview, May 3, 2016). However, foreign social agents cannot replace local ones. Because Western activists seldom have to bear the consequences of their actions, local activists and sympathizers have difficulty relating to the message put forward by these actors who gain all the "prestige" related to these actions

³ The same logic explains why for instance, the Islamic party Ennahda in Tunisia is also engaged in the defense of sex-workers' rights instead of the more secular parties. In other words, the best agents of diffusion on a particular issue are people who are seen as mainstream on that particular issue (I would like to thank Monica Marks for this observation).

but bear none of the costs. In some cases, international "resistance" may even reproduce and nourish new forms of state oppression (Massad 2007) by forcing the state to crack down on the small spaces of relative freedom that local LGBTQ communities have carved for themselves. However, transnational advocacy might work for diffusion as long it is carried by local or regional social agents who have the perceived legitimacy/stature needed to negotiate the adoption of new international norms and the ability to communicate with the local publics.

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Bankrolling Containment: Saudi Linkages with Egypt and Tunisia

By Ruth Hanau Santini, *Università degli Studi l'Orientale, Naples* and Kevin Koehler, *American University in Cairo*

Transborder linkages between autocratic states have been shown to support authoritarian regime stability (Tansey, Koehler, and Schmotz 2016). In the Middle Eastern context, attempts by Saudi Arabia to first prevent and then contain political change in the wake of the Arab Spring have received particular attention (Kamrava 2012; Rieger 2014; Farouk 2014). Going beyond such contributions, this memo points to some indications that Saudi Arabia is consolidating ties with not only Egypt under al-Sisi, but also post-revolutionary Tunisia.

While Saudi aid flows have played an important political role in Egypt since the fall of Mubarak – first starving the Morsi-government of funds and then increasing payments to unprecedented levels after the 2013 coup (Farouk 2014) – Saudi involvement in Tunisia had traditionally been limited. However, after the strengthening of old regime elites with the 2014 parliamentary and presidential elections, the Tunisian government began to shift its

foreign policy in a more pro-Saudi direction.¹ Saudi engagement in Tunisia has consequently increased, including the signing of an agreement in the field of security cooperation in December 2015.²

While Saudi-Tunisian cooperation is very much in its infancy, it is linked to a set of domestic Tunisian dynamics. We show how the rapprochement was partially made possible by a process of learning among Ennahda elites after the coup against Morsi in Egypt, which led them to accept a greater involvement of Saudi Arabia in the economic and security domain as an additional guarantee policy for their political survival.

Transnational Dimensions of the Arab Spring

1 Eric Reidy, 'Tunisia's New Government Shifts Foreign Policy,' *Al Monitor*, 24 April 2015.

2 Al-Sharq al-Awsat, 'al-qimma al-sa'udiya-al-tunisiya al-yaum ta'azuz al-ta'awun al-amniya... wa tawfiq ittifaqiya li-l-ta'awun al-difa' iya' [Saudi-Tunisian Summit Today Strengthens Security Cooperation. Signing of Defense Cooperation Agreement.], 22 December 2015.

That diffusion and learning have structured the spread of contention in the Arab Spring uprisings has long been recognized. Demonstration effects contributed to the spread of protests from Tunisia, to Egypt, to Yemen, Libya, and Syria (Weyland 2012), and social learning was countered by authoritarian learning as incumbents drew lessons from events in neighboring states (Heydemann and Leenders 2011). Beyond such forms of transnational diffusion by learning, research has also focused on how specific regional actors – principally Saudi Arabia and the wider Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – sought to influence and contain political change at home and abroad during the wave of contention in 2011 (Kamrava 2012; Rieger 2014; Farouk 2014; Matthiesen 2013).

On a more general level, Saudi reactions to the Arab Spring can be understood as at least partially driven by linkage patterns between the kingdom and specific Arab Spring countries. The tighter the linkages in terms of trade, migration, and diplomatic interaction, the higher the likelihood that Saudi Arabia would intervene on behalf of an authoritarian incumbent under stress – although such interventions were not necessarily successful as the Egyptian case demonstrates (Tansey, Koehler, and Schmotz 2016).

In this memo, we raise the question of whether a new set of linkage patterns might be emerging at the moment, particularly with respect to the strengthening of Saudi-Tunisian ties along with the continued backing of the Egyptian military regime by Saudi money. Saudi efforts have a strong security component in the form of military cooperation in joint exercises and membership in military alliances on one hand, and through cooperation in the field of domestic security on the other. This contributes to the diffusion of norms of securitization in the form counter-terrorism discourses.

This dynamic is somewhat surprising in the Tunisian case. While Saudi Arabia had actively – albeit unsuccessfully – supported the Mubarak regime in Egypt during the mass uprising, Saudi policy towards Ben Ali's Tunisia in late 2010 and early 2011 was characterized by benign neglect.

Thus, just days before Mubarak's fall in February 2011, late King Abdallah openly took the side of Mubarak, attempted to convince the United States not to put further pressure on the Egyptian ruler, and promised that the kingdom would compensate Egypt should the U.S. cut military assistance.³ At the time of Ben Ali's flight from Tunisia, by contrast, the kingdom made it known that, even though it played host to the deposed president, Ben Ali was not to engage in political activities while being a guest in Saudi Arabia.⁴ In brief, initial Saudi reactions to the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia reflected the strength of ties between the kingdom and the two countries. While a history of strong Saudi-Egyptian ties meant that the kingdom actively intervened on behalf of Mubarak, the relatively weak nature of Saudi-Tunisian ties under Ben Ali did not trigger a similar response.

This contrast becomes even more pronounced if we look at the immediate post-revolutionary period. In Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other GCC member states promised financial support for the country's transitional leadership, but froze the disbursement of funds upon the election of the Muslim Brotherhood's Muhammad Morsi to the presidency. Thus, while the Morsi administration in Egypt could only rely on Qatari money flowing into its coffers, Saudi payments resumed immediately following the July 3, 2013 coup (Farouk 2014; Rieger 2014). What is more, even during the period of Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt, military cooperation between Saudi Arabia and the Egyptian Armed Forces was maintained. The – up to that time – largest joint Egyptian-Saudi maneuvers (Tabouk 3) took place from May 8 to 20 2013, just weeks before the

3 See Elaph, 'al-Malik Abdallah talaba Obama bi-l-imtina' 'an idhlal Mubarak' [King Abdallah Asks Obama to Refrain from Humiliating Mubarak], 11 February 2011, <http://elaph.com/Web/news/2011/2/630960.html>; New York Times, 'Allies Press U.S. to Go Slow on Egypt,' 8 February 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/02/09/world/middleeast/09diplomacy.html?_r=0.

4 Al-Arab, 'Khashoggi: Al-ra'is Zin Bin `Ali asbah fi al-sa'udiyya makfuf al-yad wa la yumkinuhu 'aml ay shay,' [Khashoggi: President Ben Ali's Hands Are Tied in Saudi Arabia and He Cannot Do Anything], 16 January 2011, <http://www.alarab.com/Article/352280>; Gulfnews, 'No Saudi Mediation for Bin Ali,' 16 January 2011, <http://gulfnews.com/news/region/tunisia/no-saudi-mediation-for-bin-ali-1.746966>.

military intervention in Egypt,⁵ while the two countries' air forces still held joint exercises on 22 June 2013 (Faisal 10), not even a fortnight before the coup.⁶ Saudi support to the Egyptian military-led regime after the coup thus does not come as a surprise but rather represents the continuation of long-standing Saudi support for the old regime and the military elite in Egypt.

Saudi Arabia, along with Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, also reacted swiftly to the overthrow of Egypt's first freely elected president in July 2013. On July 9, not even a week after the coup, the three GCC countries pledged a total of 12 billion USD in aid to Egypt, including a combination of grants, loans, central bank deposits, and preferential access to oil.⁷ The political message of such aid was made blatantly clear when the late King Abdallah defended the Egyptian military's repression of pro-Morsi protestors on August 14, 2013 that left more than 1,000 dead in a single day.⁸ Speaking two days after the massacre, Abdallah accused those "interfering" in Egypt's internal affairs of promoting terrorism.⁹ Three days later, on August 19, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal announced that the Kingdom would compensate Egypt for potential losses in U.S. aid as a result of the events.¹⁰ This move effectively weakened the impact of the U.S. decision

to (temporarily) freeze military aid to Egypt and was interpreted as an affront to the U.S. position in Egypt.

Recurrent warnings that aid levels could not be maintained and political friction between Egypt and Saudi Arabia over the conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen notwithstanding, Saudi Arabia has maintained high levels of aid to Egypt. As of May 2016, the total volume of pledges by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE since the coup amount to some 60 billion USD, roughly equivalent to a yearly average of 20 percent of government expenditure.

Strengthening Ties?

In contrast to Egyptian-Saudi relations, ties between the Kingdom and Tunisia had traditionally been weak. As Sons and Wiese argue, Saudi policy makers did not perceive Tunisia as a central player and were less concerned about the influence of Islamist actors in the post-2011 context (Sons and Wiese 2015, 54–55). Despite Tunisia's peripheral position, there are signs of a Saudi-Tunisian rapprochement, not least in military and security cooperation.

Relations between Tunisia and Saudi Arabia had been lukewarm ever since the fall of Ben Ali. The late Saudi King Abdullah was concerned by regime change in Tunisia as Ben Ali "had served as a strategic ally for Saudi Arabia in the fight against terrorism, in securing stability in North Africa and in countering Iranian influence in the region" (Sons and Wiese 2015, 55). Saudi fears increased when the October 2011 elections were won by Ennahda, especially since the Ennahda-led troika government was seen as close to Turkey and Qatar, who provided significant financial help throughout 2012 and 2013.¹¹ A sign of this regional alignment was when Tunisia cut relations with the Syrian government in February 2012. Moreover, then President Moncef Marzouki called on Egypt to release Morsi in front of the UN General Assembly in September 2013 and referred to Egypt's problematic and undemocratic

5 See BBC Arabic, "Tabuk 3' akbar manawarat masriya sa'udiya mushtarika fi tarikh al-baladein" ['Tabruk 3' the largest joint Egyptian-Saudi manoeuvres in the history of the countries], 4 May 2013, http://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2013/05/130504_egypt_saudi_drill.shtml.

6 Ashraf Abd al-Hamid, 'Ma hiya asbab al-manawara al-'askariya bayna masr wa-l-sa'udiya' [What are the reasons for the military manoeuvres between Egypt and Saudi Arabia?], *al-Arabia*, 15 April 2015.

7 Rod Nordland, 'Saudi Arabia Promises to Aid Egypt's Regime,' *New York Times*, 19 August 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/20/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-vows-to-back-egypts-rulers.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.

8 Amy Holmes, 'Why Egypt's military orchestrated a massacre,' *Washington Post*, Monkey Cage, 22 August 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/08/22/why-egypts-military-orchestrated-a-massacre/>.

9 Ellen Knickmeyer, 'Saudi King Offers Support to Egyptian Military,' *Wall Street Journal*, 18 August 2013, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323423804579020510228645356>.

10 Reuters, 'Egypt Aid: Saudis Pledge To Fill Gap If U.S., Europe Cut Support,' 19 August 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/19/saudi-egypt-aid_n_3779953.html.

11 Eric Reidy, Tunisia's new government shifts foreign policy, *Al Monitor*, 24 April 2015.

transition, triggering the temporary withdrawal of the Egyptian and UAE ambassadors to Tunis.¹² However, Tunisian foreign policy did not experience a U-turn similar to Egyptian foreign policy under Morsi. Tunisia's attitude vis-à-vis Teheran (a red line from the Saudi perspective), for example, did not change significantly.

Tunisia's foreign policy stance toward Saudi Arabia softened following the resignation of Ennahda's Ali Larayedh as prime minister, who was succeeded by the technocrat Mehdi Jomaa in January 2014. With the October 2014 elections won by Nidaa Tounes, the December 2014 Presidential elections won by Nidaa's Beji Caïd Essebsi, and the ensuing participation in the new government led by Nidaa in February 2015, the policy continued to ease. In addition to the change of leadership, two other context-specific factors need to be stressed: first, Essebsi's decisive role prioritizing better bilateral relations and second, the change in Saudi posture vis-à-vis Islamist parties in the region since mid-2015.¹³

Tunisian ties with the Gulf have since increased, as exemplified by the participation of Tunisia in Saudi Arabia's 34 state Islamic anti-IS alliance, agreed in December 2015. This came after Tunisia's announcement to participate in the U.S.-led anti-IS coalition in September 2015 as part of the Essid government's commitment to "fight terrorism and extremism" at home and abroad.

Relations warmed further with the December 2015 signing of a Memorandum of Understanding for bilateral cooperation for security and defense during President Essebsi's visit to the Kingdom. Afterward, Essebsi referred to this strengthening of ties as an inevitable development in light of the challenges faced by Riyadh,

justified by Tunisian Arab identity.¹⁴ As part of this process, the two sides agreed to a yearly meeting of a mixed military commission allowing for more regular and structured exchanges of information and training in the civil protection field. Additionally, Saudi Arabia promised to provide Tunisia 48 F-5a military planes.¹⁵ Less than two weeks after Essebsi's visit to KSA, Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs Adel El-Gobeir visited Tunisia in what was described as just one of several meetings to be held between Tunisia and KSA to unify their positions toward international issues, especially terrorism, based on the reinforcement of their cooperation in the political, economic and security fields.¹⁶

In February 2016, Tunisia participated in joint military training organized by Riyadh. The "Northern Thunder" exercise took place at the northeastern borders of Saudi Arabia in the Hafr al-Batin military facility home of the GCC Peninsula Shield Force, the Gulf's rapid response unit. The training gathered 150,000 troops from 20 different Arab countries and was by far the largest operation since the liberation of Kuwait in 1991.¹⁷ While the stated goal was deterring the Islamic Republic of Iran from potentially aggressing Sunni Gulf states, more likely the show of force had to do with the desire of projecting strength and distracting public opinion from the protracted Yemen war. From its vantage point, one has to remember that, since the July 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action between Iran and the international community, Riyadh has warmed up its attitude vis-à-vis Sunni regional players, including Qatar, and including leading Brotherhood-related figures. This included Ennahda leader Rachid Ghannouchi, who was invited to

12 Robert Joyce, "Egypt and U.A.E Ambassadors Withdrawn Following Marzouki Remarks," *TunisiaLive*, 30 September 2013, <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2013/09/30/egypt-and-u-a-e-ambassadors-to-tunisia-withdrawn-following-marzouki-remarks/>.

13 Alain Gresh, *Rapprochement à petit pas entre l'Arabie Saoudite et les Frères Musulmans*, *Orient XXI*, 29 September 2015. <http://orientxxi.info/magazine/rapprochement-a-petits-pas-entre-l-arabie-saoudite-et-les-freres-musulmans,1032>

14 Munthir Bildiyafi, "President Essebsi reaffirmed Tunisia's support for Saudi Arabia foreign policy to repel any threat to its stability," *AlArabiya.net*, 29 January 2016, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2016/01/29/Tunisian-president-We-stand-by-Saudi-and-GCC-to-repel-any-threat-.html>

15 <http://aawsat.com/home/article/525261/-/تونس-اليوم-تعزز-التعاون-مع-السعودية-تونس-اليوم-تعزز-التعاون-مع-السعودية-تونس-اليوم-تعزز-التعاون-مع-السعودية>?archive=1&date=12/23/2015.

16 1 January 2016, <http://www.raialyoum.com/?p=367335>

17 Bruce Reidel, "Are latest war games just a face-saver for Riyadh?," *Al Monitor*, 18 February 2016. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/02/saudi-arabia-military-exercises-goal-iran-isis-yemen.html>

Saudi Arabia in July 2015, a move that further vindicated the lessons Ennahda leaders drew from the Egyptian experience.¹⁸

Learning and the Saudi-Tunisian Rapprochement

The rapprochement could not have happened without Tunisia's main Islamist party, Ennahda, changing its stance vis-à-vis the Kingdom. Starting from late 2013 and even more so in 2014, Ennahda leaders consciously moderated their stance towards Saudi Arabia. In the words of a senior Ennahda member of Parliament: "There are no problems with Saudi Arabia anymore. Ghannouchi has reassured them that we do not aim at exporting the Tunisian model. Tunisia wants to become the region's Switzerland."¹⁹ Moderating foreign policy alignments, in other words, became a strategy for Ennahda, especially in light of the 2013 scenario in Egypt. Ennahda MPs have often referred to the lesson learned from the coup against Morsi not only in terms of reasserting a non-majoritarian view of democracy, but also in more carefully assessing their regional alliances and the changing balance of power.²⁰ According to a senior Nidaa MP, the rapprochement was facilitated by Essebsi: "The coup against Morsi was a tournant for Ennahda. But in order to smooth relations with Riyadh, given their previous alignment with Qatar, the rapprochement was facilitated by Beji Essebsi. As a matter of fact, they are more in line with Beji's foreign policy than most of Nidaa party."²¹

One example was the toning down of Ennahda's democratic rhetoric with respect to the Gulf, frequent reference to the non-exportability of the Tunisian revolution, and the uniqueness and specificity of the Tunisian political setting.²² Over time, even the initial references to the AKP experience as a model demonstrating the compatibility of Islam and democracy

have been eclipsed and substituted with references to European experiences such as the German CDU or the Italian Christian-Democrats, further pointing to the European-ness of the Tunisian cultural and political referents for Ennahda, watering down the previous axis with Turkey. The failed July 2016 coup against Erdogan in Turkey has further complicated the position of Ennahda and its relations with Turkey. Following the coup attempt, Ennahda spokesperson Zied Ladhari immediately defended Erdogan, depicting the Turkish president and the AKP as 'brothers' and declaring the attempted coup 'outrageous and dangerous'. Interestingly, however, this was framed within a discourse of defending democracy as rule of law, separation between the military and civilian affairs, and respect for the ballot box, rather than in terms of defending Islamists in power.²³ Moreover, having lost a vote of confidence, the government in Tunis is undergoing a deep reshuffling of cabinet positions, including that of the prime minister. Ennahda, which has recovered its position as the largest political party after a recent split within Nidaa, will likely increase its share in government positions and thus improve its visibility. Ennahda will therefore once again be in the spotlight and will have to carefully assess its foreign policy stances.

Conclusion

While Saudi involvement bankrolling the return of Egypt's security apparatus is well known and documented (Farouk 2014), Saudi Arabia has played a much more limited role in Tunisia, both economically and politically. As we have attempted to show, however, there are signs of a Saudi-Tunisian rapprochement. Taking note of the Egyptian scenario, members of Tunisia's Ennahda party have begun to accommodate Saudi interests in their foreign policy stance, a dynamic further solidified by the strengthening of Tunisia's secular elites with the 2014 parliamentary elections, as well as by cautious Saudi moves towards Sunni Islamist actors in the wake of the Iran nuclear deal.

18 Hussein Ibish, "Saudi Arabia's New Sunni alliance," *New York Times*, July 31, 2015.

19 Interview, Bardo, November 2015.

20 Interviews, Tunis, February and November 2015.

21 Phone interview, July 2016.

22 Interviews, Tunis, February and November 2015.

23 Adel Lapti, Tunisia Ennahda's head condemns failed coup in Turkey, *Anadolu Post*, July 25, 2016. Link: <http://aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/tunisias-ennahda-head-condemns-failed-coup-in-turkey/615556>

While Saudi-Tunisian military and security cooperation is in its infancy, it nevertheless represents a significant step. Increased Saudi-Tunisian military cooperation, as well as closer ties in the field of civil defense and counter-terrorism, could potentially weaken pressures for reform in Tunisia's security sector, undermining efforts to restructure security provision in the country, per U.S. and EU demands for better civil-military relations, particularly accountability and human rights.

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The sectarianization of the Middle East: Transnational identity wars and competitive interference

By Raymond Hinnebusch, University of St. Andres

Introduction

Scholars have long recognized the exceptional power of identity in the Middle East and the permeability of regional states to trans-state identity discourses (Salloukh 2004). Barnett (1993) and Lynch (1999) argued that identity is shaped by discourse competition in a trans-state public space and, once constructed, it shapes actors' conceptions of their interests and generates norms that constrain their conduct. In the regional states system, rival states bid for hegemony using trans-state discourses (Kienle 1990; Hinnebusch 2013); and the main threats against which many regimes balance has not been foreign armies but subversion challenging their domestic legitimacy in the name of norms derived from identity (Gause 2003-04). Identity, therefore, matters but what is new today is the unprecedented surge of sectarian identity across the region. Instead of inclusive Pan-Arab or Pan-Islamic identities, rival states and movements now exploit the highly divisive sectarian dichotomy between Sunni and Shia.

What explains this rapid diffusion and apparent hegemony of sectarian discourse and practices across the region? This paper will survey the accumulation of factors behind the sectarian surge and argue that it is chiefly the outcome of the state failures brought about by the Arab spring: first, state failures have greatly intensified power struggles within states and across the region in which sectarianism has been instrumentalized; and second, such failures have greatly intensified pre-existing permeability of states, amplifying mechanisms of diffusion, from emulation to intervention.

Explaining Sectarian Diffusion: From Banal Sectarianism to Sectarian Bi-Polarization

There are multiple identities in the Middle East, located

at sub-state (communal minorities, tribes), state and trans/supra-state (Pan Arabism, Pan-Islam) levels and the dominant identity has changed over time. Sectarianism is only one possible identity and is not an undifferentiated phenomenon (Haddad 2011). So what explains its increasing hegemony across the region?

Instrumentalization of Banal Sectarianism

Sectarianism is rooted at the micro-level individual/group. This *everyday (or banal) sectarianism* is an un-politicized identity marker in multi-communal societies compatible with sectarian co-existence and with broader identities (e.g. Arabism). The first step toward sectarianization is its politicization. This may be a function of the increased competition for scarce resources accompanying modernization, especially in times of rapid population growth and increases in the educated unemployed; when many resources are state distributed, political entrepreneurs are incentivized to use sectarianism to mobilize sects in intrastate competition over resources, as famously in Lebanon and individuals to use sectarianism to gain access to clientele networks. This "instrumental sectarianism" has little doctrinal implications or necessary incompatibility with sectarian coexistence.

Sectarianism's use in authoritarian regime building in MENA's multi-sectarian societies further politicized it: patrimonial practices such as reliance on trusted sectarians to foster cohesive ruling groups, as in Syria and Iraq, was a common practice, but it was also balanced by cross-sectarian co-optation of wider social forces, via bureaucratic institutions. Many authoritarian regimes, therefore, both *used* and *contained* sectarianism. However, where inclusionary practices eroded, the excluded, feeling themselves victims of sectarian discrimination, might well embrace a sectarian counter-identity, as was particularly the case in Syria and Iraq. But such sectarianization was

by no means inevitable or particularly widespread; the system seemed self-reproducing and required external intervention to set off the destabilization of multi-sectarian states.

Precipitating the Sectarian Struggle: From Global Intrusion to the New Arab Cold War

The current sectarianization is a recent phenomenon precipitated by the unprecedented intrusion of the U.S. global hegemon into the regional power struggle. The destruction of the Iraqi state amidst massive violence (shock and awe) unleashed Sunni-Shia civil war in Iraq. The United States constructed a replacement political system that institutionalized sectarianism. This failed state provided a congenial space for international jihadists, including al-Qaeda, to stir up sectarianism by targeting Shia mosques. It also allowed for intense penetration of Iraq by Iranian backed Iraqi Shia exiles and by anti-Shia jihadists transiting through Syria – an unprecedented transnationalization of sectarian conflict. The Iraq conflict spilled over in the region by stimulating sectarian discourse in the trans-state media.

Moreover, the empowering of Iranian-linked Iraqi Shia movements alarmed the Sunni Gulf powers, which fought back by instrumentalizing sectarianism. This resulted in what has been called the “New Arab Cold War,” which polarized the regional system in the 2000s between two rival camps – framed as the pro-Western Moderate Sunni bloc (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan) and the Resistance Axis (Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas – fighting over sectarian-divided Lebanon and Iraq and divided over the Israeli wars against Hezbollah and Gaza. In the latter, the resistance camp, portraying its rivals as siding with Israel, won the war for public opinion. The moderate bloc fought back by portraying the issue as Shiite Iran’s interference in the Arab world against Sunnis. King Abdullah of Jordan famously warned of a “Shia Crescent.” Despite this, sectarianism found little resonance on the Arab street where Nasrallah, Assad and Ahmadinejad were the most popular regional leaders for their resistance to what was still seen as the main enemy, Israel (Valbjørn and Bank 2011). At the elite

level though, the power struggle came to be perceived in sectarian zero-sum terms, destroying the tradition of inter-Arab compromise under which (since the end of the first Arab Cold War) regimes had refrained from attacking the others’ vital interests.

The Arab Uprising: from revolt to civil war and grassroots sectarianization:

The Arab uprising further intensified the struggle for power. Once regimes were challenged, they instrumentalized sectarianism. In Syria, Iraq and Bahrain elites’ use of sectarianism to consolidate their support bases provoked counter-sectarianism among oppositions. Unlike in the 2000s, this instrumentalization of sectarianism found wide resonance in Arab societies for several reasons.

First, civil wars during which unrestrained violence was deployed in a zero-sum power struggle, turned fighters on both sides to jihadist versions of sectarianism. Jihadism is incompatible with sectarian coexistence, because it seeks to impose, if necessary by force, its one true interpretation of Islam in the public sphere, demonizing those who do not comply as infidels, and embracing martyrdom for the cause. Unlike an instrumentalist pursuit of material goods, which can be compromised by adjusting shares among the contenders, public religious visions cannot readily be compromised. (Brubaker 2015).

Second, as civil wars led to state failure, notably in the Levant, the renewed permeability of states borders allowed Salafist jihadists to intervene on one side and a counter-coalition of Shia led minorities (*hulf al-aqalliyyat*) on the other. There was an unprecedented movement of foreign Muslim fighters into disputed states, while militias from one country, recruited via long-distance sectarian networks, regularly intervened in neighboring countries, propelling an unprecedented transnationalization of opposing sectarian movements and networks.

Third, the security dilemma pushed all sides to fall back on their communal group for protection; this, combined with

sectarian cleansing and intensely sectarian discourse in the satellite and social media, entrenched sectarianism at the grassroots of many Arab societies.

Competitive Interference and Sectarian Proxy Wars:

In parallel, the Arab uprising reshuffled the cards in the regional power struggle of the 2000s, as state failures created vacuums inviting competitive external intervention in which rival powers provided arms and financing to bring sectarian-affiliated allies to power in uprising states. Notably Syria, the linchpin of the resistance axis, became an arena of competitive intervention, since all sides perceived that the outcome of this “New Struggle for Syria” would tilt the regional power balance in favor of one or the other of the rival camps (Hinnebusch 2015).

Sectarian discourses became the main currency of the new identity wars. Sectarianism in its jihadist version is a particularly powerful instrument for subverting rival regimes, since it combines a sub-state character – the existence of grassroots communities within a state into which people are born – with the transnational networks to mobilize supporters across borders. As the rival regional powers backed the most sectarian factions – because they were the best fighters – the latter came to enjoy greater resources, precipitating a “bandwagoning” of more “moderate” factions to the jihadist poles, further exacerbating sectarianism.

States had unequal advantages when playing the new sectarian power game. Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, with historical identities relatively congruent with their borders and commanding the material resources to co-opt populations, create large security forces, and establish administrative structures over their territory, were more capable of making their borders impermeable to subversion. Their use of sectarianism in the regional struggle strengthened internal support (despite a risk of blowback, e.g. when Saudi Arabia’s export of Wahhabism helped create a threat to it in the form of ISIS). Their trans-state ideological appeal was fostered by superior command of satellite media and financial resources, arms transfers

and territorial safe havens enabling their competitive intervention.

By contrast, the most identity-fragmented states (Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain) were victims of the new power struggle. Sectarianism polarized their populations, opposition was framed in sectarian terms and regimes relied more on defensive sectarian *asabiyyeh* (solidarity). Their often-arbitrarily constructed borders, which cut across identity groups and generated irredentism, made them more permeable to trans-state media, networks and movements and – to the extent they experienced state failure and were unable to defend their borders – they were magnets attracting proxy wars. While they had been players when regional rivalry focused on interpretations of Arab nationalism, sectarianization knocked them out of the game.

Each intervening power has used sectarianism, but strategies differ. Saudi Arabia played a key role in fostering Sunni sectarianism, seeking to exploit the demographic majority of the Sunni world against Iran by depicting the Shia as a heretical minority and Iran’s role as non-Arab interference in the Arab world. Iran’s Pan-Islamic discourse tried to re-frame the issue as Muslim resistance against the West and its regional collaborators (i.e. Saudi Arabia). While Saudi Arabia exploited Salafist proxies, Iran mobilized trans-national Shia clerical networks. The greater divisions within the Sunni world (e.g. secularists vs. Islamists, Sufi vs. Salafi, Saudi vs. Qatari, Erdogan’s Turkey vs. Sissi’s Egypt) compensated for the Shia’s demographic inferiority.

Sectarian Bi-polarization:

These factors stimulated a powerful cumulative tendency to bi-polarize the region between Sunni and Shia sectarianism in which the moderate secular center was being squeezed out. This was paralleled by radicalization *within* each of the two confessions: within Sunnism, the normative balance has shifted away from the previously majority non-violent versions that accepted co-existence, notably Sufis whose “everyday’ sectarianism” was non-

political and accommodationist with secular authorities and other sects. Sufism suffered from the rise of Salafist fundamentalism, which, particularly in failed states such as Syria, easily slips into jihadism. At the same time, the modernists of the Muslim Brotherhood brand struggled to sustain their discourse on a civil state, squeezed between regimes' repression and jihadi mobilization. Within Shiism, too, politicized militias, composed of zealots ready for martyrdom in defence of Shia shrines and neighbourhoods, joined the fighting in Syria and Iraq. This has shifted the normative balance within Islam away from co-existence and toward *takfiri* practices (claiming other Muslims are apostates or infidels).

This is not to say that this bi-polarization is uncontested or necessarily permanent. Class, local and tribal identities cross-cut sectarianism and civic identities compete with it. People have many identities and the embrace of sect is a function of the current violent conflicts and its instrumentalization in the regional power struggle.

Conclusion

What began as a variant of the struggle for regional hegemony between powers aligned with and against U.S. intervention in Iraq, framed in familiar Arab-Islamic terms (resistance), has been transformed by the Arab uprising into an unprecedented sectarian bi-polarization of the regional system. Sectarian bi-polarization in the inter-state power struggle was paralleled by a shifting normative balance away from moderates within both Shia and Sunni Islam and by polarizations splitting several identity-fragmented Arab states apart.

Why has this sectarian diffusion so swiftly achieved near-hegemony in the wake of the Arab uprisings? Part of the answer is the instrumentalization of sectarianism in the intense – even existential – power struggles unleashed by the uprising. Inside states, warring patrimonial regime remnants and opposition charismatic movements draw on the historically successful “Khalidounian” practices to build power: in multi-sectarian societies *sectarianism is understood to work* in generating *asabiyya*, mobilizing

followers and demonizing enemies. This could be seen as authoritarian learning: drawing on extensive past repertoires widely available in regional memories to address new episodes of state formation/deformation. At the trans-state level, competition for leadership within sects promotes outbidding by radical sectarian entrepreneurs that marginalizes moderates, a successful practice then widely emulated, which deepens sectarianism. Similarly, in regional level power struggles, rival states emulate each other in what might be called “tit for tat sectarianism” – when one side frames the struggle in sectarian terms, its success leads its rivals to similarly respond.

But what makes this instrumentalization of sectarianism – which before the uprising had, outside of Iraq, quite limited success – so potent? First, the widespread weakening of states has made them much more permeable than hitherto to the diffusion of sectarianism by extensive previously-existing transnational linkages – discourses of preachers, activist networks and armed movements. Second, the unprecedented level of competitive intervention by rival regional powers in failed states results in proxy wars funded and armed by kindred sectarians. Third, in failing states civil war violence and security dilemmas transforms identities in a sectarian direction at the expense of more inclusive ones. Thus, similar structural factors (state failure, civil war) combined with trans-state penetration, emulation, and intervention make states and populations susceptible to unparalleled sectarian diffusion.

The change of dominant identities used in the regional power struggle from supra-state ones to sectarianism profoundly impacts the conduct of politics. The previous dominance of Arabism contributed to the integration of Arabic speaking religious minorities within states and enjoined the Arab states to cooperate at the regional level. By contrast, the current version of radical sectarianism prescribes uncompromising jihad *within* the Islamic umma against heresy. In this Sunni-Shia bi-polarization of the region all people and states are pushed to take sides. This intensified regional power struggle waged by sectarian discourse and proxy wars is plunging the Middle East into a new dark age.

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Transnational Diffusion between Arab Shia Movements

Toby Matthiesen, *St. Antony's College, University of Oxford*

Arab Shia communities are all related in multiple ways to their local and national contexts. Given their geographical dispersion and doctrinal pluralism there are important differences, but they have long had strong transnational connections as well, particularly to the shrine cities and Hawzas (Shia religious schools) in Iraq and Iran. Anti-Shia polemics generally overemphasize these transnational connections, while Arab Shia leaders often downplay them, stating that the national affiliation is the most important trait of Arab Shia identity.

A Transnational Shia Public Sphere

Since 2011, transnational identities amongst Arab Shia – and to an extent also between Arab and Persian Shia and Afghan and Pakistani Shia – have become more important, as the fallouts from the Arab uprisings broke down nation states and led to the strengthening of various pre-existing transnational identities.¹ A key facilitator of these strengthened transnational identities, not only amongst the Shia, was the unraveling of a broader Arab public sphere. The development of distinctive public spheres for particular sectarian communities in the Middle East is the result of the failure and fracturing of the “New Arab Public Sphere,” which had been epitomized by the rise of pan-Arab satellite TV channels such as al-Jazeera since the 1990s. Crucially, this new Arab Public Sphere failed to shape the outcomes of the Arab uprisings towards inclusion and political transition, and instead was hijacked by competing interest groups, many of which set up separate media channels.²

What I call the Shia public sphere is made up of both media outlets and physical places of public debate.

1 Toby Matthiesen, ‘Transnational Identities after the Arab Uprisings’ in: Luigi Narbone and Martin Lestra (ed.), *The Gulf Monarchies beyond the Arab spring: changes and challenges* (Florence: European University Institute, 2015), 32-37. https://www.academia.edu/18203141/Transnational_Identities_after_the_Arab_Uprisings

2 http://www.marclynch.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Lynch_CurrentHistory.pdf.

Numerous satellite TV stations, social media accounts, websites and some newspapers are part of a Shia public sphere, as are actual spaces, either discussion forums such as diwanis in the Gulf states, or mosques, coffee houses and other public places in Iraq or the Levant. As the only state with Shiism as a state religion, Iran plays an important part in the (Arab) Shia public sphere that I discuss here, by sponsoring media outlets such as the Arabic language TV channels al-Alam and via the Lebanese Hezbollah al-Manar channel. Other TV channels and countless websites are run by non-state actors, the offices of a number of Grand Ayatollahs, political parties or sectarian identity entrepreneurs.

The initial protests across the Arab world were not from the beginning viewed through a sectarian lens, and support on social media in particular was often cross-sectarian and international. The Bahrain uprising and protests by Shia Muslims in Eastern Saudi Arabia were greeted with particular sympathy in the Shia public sphere. The militarization of the Syrian uprising, in particular from 2012 and 2013 onwards, and the emergence of the Islamic State as a distinctively anti-Shia movement in 2014, broke down any consensus that was left in the Arab public sphere about the Arab uprisings.³

Syria and the so-called Islamic State became key topics in the Shia public sphere, strengthening transnational connections amongst Arab Shia communities. The language, practice and symbolism of Shia political mobilization and militancy that diffused through this public sphere were quite distinct from previous Shia militant movements. The establishment of militias to defend the shrine of Sayyida Zainab and al-Hashd al-Shaabi, were the two key examples of this new Shia political mobilization. Since 2015, the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen became another key topic in

3 <http://rap.sagepub.com/content/1/3/2053168014549091.full.pdf+html>.

sectarianized public spheres across the region.⁴

The Shia Jihad in Syria

Iran and Shia militias' support of the Baath regime in Syria is symbolically legitimized by the defense of the shrine of Sayyida Zainab. Sayyida Zainab derives its name from Zainab, a granddaughter of the prophet Muhammad and daughter of Ali Ibn Abi Talib. Many Shia Muslims believe that Zainab is buried in a suburb some six miles to the southeast of Syria's capital Damascus, which has become a key target for the armed opposition. With Lebanese Hezbollah, the fight for that suburb has drawn a large number of Iraqi Shia fighters to Syria. The Iraqi recruits usually come from one of the Shia militias that became notorious in the civil war and the fight against coalition troops in Iraq. There are a plethora of Shia militias in Iraq, some with tens of thousands of fighters. While there are ideological and personal differences amongst Shia militias such as Asaib Ahl al-Haqq, Iraqi Hezbollah, the Badr Corps, and Muqtada al-Sadr's supporters (Mahdi Army), they all have quite strong ties to Iran. With the start of the Syrian civil war and the rise of anti-Shia militias in Syria and Northern Iraq, they started fighting in Syria alongside the Assad regime, Iranian Special Forces, Lebanese Hezbollah and Afghani and Pakistani Shia militants.⁵ These foreign militias have saved Sayyida Zainab, but they have also further internationalized the Syrian civil war. By choosing to protect a Shia shrine city, they have made a sectarian statement, somewhat paradoxically supporting their enemies' claims that this is indeed a holy war between Sunni and Shia Muslims.

Many Gulf Shia support the defense of the shrine, not least because some may have spent their summer holidays there or have been involved in the transnational networks that

moved through the suburb over the past decades. Some of the foreign Shia fighters who travel to Syria might also be motivated by strong religious feelings about Zainab, or by a sense of religious duty to wage jihad against Sunni extremists. Lebanese and Iraqi Shia fighters who have died in Syria are lauded at home as "martyrs in the defense of the holy shrines of Sayyida Zainab," even if they were killed elsewhere in the conflict.⁶ The sectarianized narrative of the Syrian conflict will have contributed to their decision to go to Syria to fight. The Syrian war has thus militarized numerous Arab and non-Arab Shia communities, or at the least has made the prospect of militarization more feasible, nominally under the banner of defending a holy site. This will have repercussions for years to come.

The Islamic State and Shia Mobilization

The establishment of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, or the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), in 2014 in Iraq, has had consequences across the Shia world as well. In response to the quick military success of the Islamic State, and the threat that it could take over the Shia shrine cities and possibly even Baghdad, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a fatwa urging all able men to join the PMF.⁷ The establishment of the PMFs and their success and popularity in Iraq, has had a particular impact in the Gulf region. The sense of urgency with which the PMFs were initially created was also felt in the Gulf, when the Islamic State started targeting Shia mosques in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Since 2014, IS claimed responsibility for bombings and shootings in several Shia mosques and hussainiyyas in Eastern Saudi Arabia, as well as a major bombing in Kuwait. Together with an attack on an Ismaili mosque in Najran, attacks on Saudi security forces, and attacks in Yemen, this was the start of a broader campaign in the Arabian Peninsula, whose ultimate goal was to bring

4 https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2016RP05_trs_wrf.pdf.

5 See, amongst other sources, "Iraq's sectarian crisis reignites as Shi'a militias execute civilians and remobilize", Institute for the Study of War, June 1, 2013, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/iraqs-sectarian-crisis-reignites-shia-militias-execute-civilians-and-remobilize>; Philipp Smyth, *The Shi'ite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects* (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 2015).

6 "Syrian war widens Sunni-Shia schism as foreign jihadis join fight for shrines", *The Guardian*, 4 June 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/04/syria-islamic-sunni-shia-shrines-volunteers>.

7 See various articles by Renad Mansour on the topic, including "The Popularity of the Hashd in Iraq", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 1, 2016, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis?fa=62638>. See also <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/iraqs-shia-militias-arent-bad-you-think-16291>.

down the Al Saud ruling family and “cleanse” the Arabian Peninsula from the “rejectionists,” a pejorative term used to describe Shia Muslims.⁸

Many Shiites in the Eastern Province felt betrayed and let down by the state and became fearful of more attacks.⁹ Community leaders called for the establishment of popular protection committees to prevent future attacks. While obviously different from the armed mass mobilization in Iraq, these committees share the same name with the Iraqi forces, al-Hashd al-Shaabi, or the Popular Mobilization. As in Iraq, senior clerics called for the establishment of the committees. In the Saudi case the call was led by Abd al-Karim al-Hubayl, the leader of Khat al-Imam, a pro-Iranian social movement that had been active in the Eastern Province since the 1980s, as well as other senior Saudi Shiite clerics. Soon thereafter, committees were organized in each village and urban quarter, and in specific mosques and hussainiyyas, to check people entering places of worship. Pictures of men in orange vests from the committees stopping and checking cars and monitoring people at the entrances of mosques, as well as female patrols at the entrances for females, were distributed on a specifically established Twitter account.¹⁰ In some of the later attacks, in particular at the al-Anoud mosque in Dammam in May 2015, committee members actually prevented the attackers from entering the mosque, but died while trying to keep the militants out.¹¹ These guards also prevented a bomber from entering the al-Umran mosque in Qatif in July 2016, after which he blew himself up.¹²

8 See, amongst others, Cole Bunzel, *The Kingdom and the Caliphate. Duel of the Islamic States*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2016, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/02/18/kingdom-and-caliphate-duel-of-islamic-states/iu4w>; Toby Matthiesen, “Sectarianism after the Saudi mosque bombings,” *Washington Post*, May 29, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/05/29/sectarianism-after-the-saudi-mosque-bombings>.

9 <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-crown-prince-accused-silence-sectarianism-visit-qatif-82588106>.

10 See <https://twitter.com/QatifDirect>, in particular throughout 2015 and early 2016.

11 See the documentary about the work of the committees and the bombing of al-Anoud mosque, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=88WwDnd9S-k&feature=youtu.be>.

12 <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2016/07/12/Omran-Mosque-The-traditional-Shiite-fort-in-Qatif.html>.

While the guards are not armed and at times also work with the police, the committees’ actions were seen as an implicit threat to the state. Several of those working in the Saudi committees were subsequently arrested. On Twitter, some started to denounce these committees using the hashtag “No to the Shiite Committees in Qatif,” replacing *shaabi* (popular) with *shii* (Shiite). But the committees have now become a reality on the ground. Similar committees have been established in other Shia communities in the Gulf to protect mosques, in particular in Bahrain.

Conclusion

Despite the inclusive aspirations and slogans of the early Arab uprisings, transnational identities based on sect have strengthened across the Middle East. This has happened to a large extent through sectarianized public spheres. While the Bahrain uprising initially proved divisive, the growing polarization and sectarianization of the Syrian conflict and the rise of a distinctively anti-Shia movement, the so-called Islamic State, have been the main topics that could be used in these sectarianized public spheres to further the narrative of an epic rivalry between Sunni and Shia Muslims. One example of such diffusion through sectarianized public spheres is the spreading of a particular form of Shia militancy, the PMFs, across Arab Shia communities. Another example of diffusion, or franchising, is the so-called Islamic State, which claimed to have franchises across the Islamic world and beyond, and whose attacks spurred counter-mobilizations amongst the Shia. As a result, Arab Shia communities in the Levant, Iraq and the Gulf became more connected. A set of pan-Shia militant symbols and a discourse on protecting Zainab and countering “Daesh” and “Takfiri” movements has emerged that resonates strongly across different Shia communities. Widely spread through social media and Shia satellite channels these narrative diffused across the Shia public sphere, which has proven vital to strengthening transnational sectarian identities.

The diffusion of contrapuntal anti-sectarian protests

Bassel Salloukh, Lebanese American University, Beirut

Violent conflicts pitting Sunni against Shiite and vehement rhetoric from Syria to the Gulf have led many to view the Middle East as inescapably sectarian. Indeed, sectarianism has become the dominant narrative and marker of political identity not only in Western discourse but also in the Arab public sphere. Though the region enjoyed malleable, multilayered identities in the past, sectarianism has filled the institutional and ideological vacuum since the Arab uprisings, and sectarianized geopolitical contests have caused a number of states concomitant collapse as a result.

Despite this divisive wave overtaking the Arab world, anti-sectarian voices persist. New protest movements searching for more inclusive types of political organization have sprung up, specifically rejecting the sectarian practices imposed from above by elite power sharing pacts. Part of a loose heterogeneous global trend, these grass roots movements protest the corruption of political elite, the failure of the state to deliver on an array of social provisions and the lopsided consequences of neoliberal economic policies. They express a post-uprisings irreversibly and “unprecedentedly mobilized Arab public sphere,” despite a ruthless authoritarian restoration. This kind of anti-sectarian politics does not fit the current narrative, making it all the more important.

The two most striking examples of such protest movements began — intriguingly — simultaneously in Iraq and Lebanon, in the summer of 2015. Each built on previous popular protests but took them in surprising new directions.

Thousands of mainly young Iraqis poured into the squares and streets of major Iraqi cities on July 31, 2015 in what became a massive popular movement. The protesters demanded better state service provisions, holding the Green Zone political elite accountable for squandering public resources and corrupting the bureaucracy. They also demanded the elimination of the sectarian quota system

on which the post-invasion political order and patronage networks are based.

As Wadood Hamad contended in an opinion piece in *as-Safir* newspaper, these protests were shaped by two patent characteristics. The predominantly Shiite protesters in the southern and central parts of the country mobilized independent of both secular and religious parties; parliamentarians affiliated with establishment political parties were denied access to the crowds. The protests were also expressly nonsectarian, as protesters intentionally distanced themselves from sectarian or ethnic symbols and discourse. However, the protests failed to build networks with similar demands in the largely Sunni areas and remained localized and contained.

Simultaneously in Beirut, a solid waste management crisis triggered demonstrations against corruption of the sectarian political elite and the dysfunctional sectarian power sharing pact. Attracting a broader base of cross-sectarian and cross-class supporters than its counterparts in Baghdad, it assumed the air of an anti-sectarian carnival of national conviviality, with people determined to creatively express their national, rather than sectarian, affiliations.

The sectarian political elite’s response in Baghdad and Beirut to these protests was strikingly similar. They first tried to adopt a reformist discourse and contain the protests by co-opting some of the organizers. When these tactics failed to break the protesters’ autonomy and determination, they unleashed state security units and their own paralegal forces. Lacking any umbrella institutional structure and a menu of priorities, the first batch of demonstrations soon fizzled away.

Another wave of expressly anti-sectarian protests exploded in Baghdad in February 2016. Public exasperation with the corruption and failed promises of the Green Zone

political elite again spilled into the streets as protesters demanded far-reaching anti-corruption reforms, a new technocratic cabinet and the elimination of sectarian quotas. This time, however, the protests were instrumentalized by the charismatic maverick Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr projecting himself as the champion of a national underclass. Nevertheless, the 2016 protests in Iraq expressed people's insistence on mobilizing outside sectarian identities. As Zahra Ali notes, the protesters "brought new hopeful, creative and inclusive ways of being Iraqi in a country traumatized by decades of authoritarianism, imperialist military occupation, sectarian war and the fragmentation of its territory." No small feat indeed.

In Lebanon, the failure of the 2015 protests led to a more focused anti-sectarian and anti-corruption but apolitical campaign in the form of the independent grass-roots movement Beirut Madinati (or "Beirut, my city"). Launched to contest the May 2016 municipal elections in the capital, the movement exploded onto the public scene and transformed a bland electoral contest into a politically existential threat to the country's sectarian political elite.

Though electoral rules and shenanigans denied Beirut Madinati any seats on the new municipal council, its experience suggests there is a broad anti- and cross-sectarian audience fed up with the corruption of the postwar sectarian elite and the paralysis of the country's power sharing pact. They may be a silent minority given the complex ensemble of institutional, clientelist and discursive practices undergirding the political economy

and ideological hegemony of sectarianism, but they are nevertheless waiting to be organized by new movements practicing a new kind of inclusive politics.

This underscores the challenges facing political reforms in weak state institutions crippled by sectarianized geopolitical battles. In Lebanon, grass roots demands have collided with a resilient sectarian system sustaining the privileges of an increasingly overlapping political economic elite. Iraq's quandary is similar. The prognosis for Iraq by Maria Fantappie, senior Iraq analyst at the International Crisis Group, resonates aptly in Lebanon: "The system cannot generate renewal of the political class — whether through elections or legislative changes — nor will the political class genuinely try to reform that system."

Contrapuntal, nonviolent, anti-sectarian protests in Iraq and Lebanon suggest that sectarianism is not taken for granted by all actors and that there are alternatives to the sectarianization of everyday politics across the region. Challenging sectarianism operates in piecemeal, interrupted and not necessarily linear ways, gradually exposing fissures in what may otherwise look like a hegemonic sectarian edifice. And although they have yet to cause a real redistribution of political power that empowers counterfactual nonsectarian or cross-sectarian groups, these modes of resistance nevertheless demystify the sectarian narrative so dominant in the post-uprisings Arab public sphere, showing that sectarian modes of political mobilization are neither primordial nor insurmountable.



The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see <http://www.pomeps.org>.