

# Tracking the “Arab Spring”

## WHY THE MODEST HARVEST?

*Jason Brownlee, Tarek Masoud, and Andrew Reynolds*

*Jason Brownlee* is associate professor of government and Middle Eastern studies at the University of Texas–Austin. *Tarek Masoud* is associate professor of public policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. *Andrew Reynolds* is associate professor of political science at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill.

Nearly three years after the Arab uprisings began, democracy remains elusive in the Middle East. Tunisians, who lit the torch of revolution in December 2010, now walk a precarious line between institutional reform and social violence. In Egypt, a fitful transition to democracy, marked by intense polarization between Islamists and their opponents, seems to have been stopped in its tracks by a military coup and follow-on strife. More than a year after the overthrow of Yemen’s dictator, that country has yet to hold multiparty elections for a new government. Meanwhile, violent militias and endemic state weakness threaten Libya’s democratic experiment. And those are the “success stories.” Elsewhere in the Arab world, uprisings have subsided or never materialized. The Bahraini monarchy literally beat its opponents into submission. In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad’s war on his own country has killed or rendered homeless tens of thousands. In eight more Arab-majority countries, autocrats have yet to face any concerted challenge.

The Arab Spring that resides in the popular imagination is one in which a wave of mass mobilization swept the broader Middle East, toppled dictators, and cleared the way for democracy. The reality is that few Arab countries have experienced anything of the sort. The Arab Spring’s modest harvest—a record far less inspiring than those of the East European revolutions of 1989 or sub-Saharan Africa’s political transitions in the early 1990s—cries out for explanation. Why did regime change, which we conservatively define as merely the replacement of a dictator rather than the installation of a democracy, take place in only four of fourteen Arab countries?

This essay attempts to answer that question. It develops what we believe to be the first *regional* explanation of regime outcomes from the Arab uprisings of 2010 to 2012. Our explanatory framework owes a tremendous intellectual debt to the leading initial studies of the Arab Spring, but differs from its precursors in empirical breadth and causal depth. First, we seek to account for the full range of variance: from the absence or failure of uprisings in places such as Algeria and Saudi Arabia at one end to Tunisia's rocky but still hopeful transition at the other. Second, we broaden our temporal aperture, shifting from the proximate variables that have hitherto commanded the most attention, such as the diffusion of social-networking tools and the posture of the army, to examine the historical and structural factors that determined the balance of power between incumbents and oppositionists. By rooting our explanation in structural variables whose values could have been observed and measured prior to the Arab Spring, we avoid the risk of generating a post hoc "just-so story" that retrospectively reads causes from outcomes.

Surveying the region, we find that there were no structural preconditions for the *emergence* of uprisings: The fundamentally random manner in which protests spread meant that a wide variety of regimes faced popular challenges. We find, however, that the *success* of a domestic campaign to oust the ruler was structurally preconditioned by two variables: oil wealth (which endows the ruler with enough material resources to forestall or contain challenges) and the precedent of hereditary succession (which indicates the heightened loyalty of coercive agents to the executive). We find that *only* regimes that lacked major oil revenue *and* had not established hereditary succession succumbed relatively quickly and nonviolently to domestic uprisings. By contrast, where dictators had inherited rule (whether through traditional monarchism or corrupted republicanism) or commanded vast oil rents, their repressive forces remained sufficiently loyal and cohesive to conduct brutal crackdowns, often reaching the level of outright warfare.

In the discussion below, we strive to put forward a framework that builds theoretically and conceptually on previous approaches to this subject and sheds light on the future of the Arab world and its current season of tumult. An important implication of the theory presented here is that the Arab Spring's low-hanging fruit have already been picked. Those hoping that some new wave of popular protest in a Saudi Arabia or a Jordan will trigger a Tunisian-style flight of the dictator and the ushering in of a new constitutional order will find those hopes to be forlorn.

### Some Initial Theories

Social scientists studying the Arab Spring have made significant contributions to our understandings of the dynamics of protest, the breakdown of autocracy, and the establishment of democracy. Like their

predecessors who analyzed transitions away from authoritarianism in Southern Europe and Latin America, scholars of the Arab uprisings have focused on proximate causes, emphasizing the agency of activists and officers. Activist-centered explanations of the uprisings made particular sense, at first. The grievances of protesters captured attention because the demonstrations of the Arab Spring were the most potent expressions of mass discontent that those countries had witnessed in decades. Activists spoke powerfully of both the old regimes' failings and of popular aspirations for "dignity," so it was natural for observers to locate in these the drivers of citizen activism. Similarly, the speed with which previously disparate social groups managed to organize collectively to challenge regimes naturally caused scholars to home in on the new information technologies that supposedly made such collective action possible. But the narrative of youthful pluck and technological savvy goes only so far. Activists from Rabat to Riyadh had access to Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, and yet the story of most democratic activists in the Arab world remains one of disappointment and defeat.

In order to explain the fall or survival of autocracies during the Arab Spring, scholars shifted their attention from activists to the central elites of the regimes themselves, placing military leaders center stage. In both Egypt and Tunisia, the dictator's position became untenable when the armed forces refused to use force, whereas in Syria the military flew swiftly and savagely to the regime's defense. In one of the most influential attempts to explain this variation, Eva Bellin argued that the likelihood that a military will resist calls for a brutal crackdown on behalf of the dictator is a function of its bureaucratization and professionalization.<sup>1</sup> Yet while it is easy to argue in hindsight that the Egyptian military was more professionalized—and less loyal to the president—than Syria's, it is much harder to identify variables that in 2010 or earlier would have forecast the defections of militaries in Tunisia and Egypt and the military's loyalty in Syria. In fact, few would have predicted that Egypt's military would follow the Tunisian army's lead and break from the incumbent. For though Tunisia has boasted a long tradition of civilian control over the military that might explain the army's reluctance to back Ben Ali, the scholarly wisdom on Egypt had long held that the army and the regime were one. Thus, most accounts of military behavior during the uprisings have been exercises in post hoc reasoning that read the generals' preferences from their actions.

Other scholars have looked toward structural and historical explanations. For example, some have pointed to the importance of monarchism in staving off regime change, while others have noted the stasis-enhancing effects of oil.<sup>2</sup> Though these accounts are valuable (as we shall see below), they nonetheless fail to explain the entire range of outcomes. After all, Syria is neither a monarchy nor a major oil exporter, and yet its regime has managed to hang on in the face of one of the most concerted challenges to authoritarian rule in modern Middle Eastern history.

This essay builds upon competing theories. Noting the decision calculus of generals, the political effects of oil revenues, and the peculiar qualities of monarchism, we offer a parsimonious theory that predicts outcomes in fourteen Arab-majority states of the Middle East and North Africa. (Iraq and Lebanon lie outside our scope conditions because they exhibit a high degree of multiparty competition, unlike the authoritarian situations of the remaining cases.) In the following sections, we present our theory, and then illustrate how the dynamics that we identify operated in the fourteen cases of regime continuity and change during the Arab Spring.

### Cash, Commitment, and Control

To stay in power, an autocrat needs two things: money and loyalty. Cash can be used to buy off foes—and to buy the means of crushing them in case they turn out not to be for sale. Rulers also need the loyalty of the agents who wreak state violence. The fealty of the men with guns imbues an autocrat with extraordinary despotic power, enabling him to act *upon* the population rather than in dialogue with it.

The notion that despots with enough resources and repressive forces will stay in power is true by definition. Going from tautology to causality means rooting these proximate variables in factors that pre-dated the Arab Spring by years, if not decades. Specifically, we trace the command of money to the massive inflows of oil rents that began after October 1973, and we tie loyalty—and hence, despotic power—to the inception of dynastic rule through hereditary succession.

**Oil wealth.** Though all autocrats possess material resources, we argue that only oil wealth endows the dictator with sufficient means to stave off mass challenges. Thus, we sort the fourteen Arab countries under consideration based on whether they are major oil exporters. We code as oil-rich the seven Arab OPEC members (Algeria, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) plus Bahrain, a tiny country that has fairly small reserves by regional standards, but which still enjoys petrochemical rents that in real terms are three times what Venezuela took in from oil in 1958, the year of that country's democratic transition.<sup>3</sup>

Why equate oil with regime-stabilizing revenue? Scholars of the Middle East have long maintained that the oil-rich regimes of the region have a distinctive form of politics based on vast resource rents that obviate the need to tax the citizenry.<sup>4</sup> There are many ways in which oil wealth is thought to hold back democracy. For example, the flow of hydrocarbon rents can weaken civil society and stunt the growth of a modern workforce, diminishing the capacity of populations to mount serious challenges to their regimes.<sup>5</sup> We focus on two more direct mechanisms by which oil hinders democracy: by enabling an autocrat to buy the quiescence of his citizens, and, failing that, to purchase the means to silence them by force.

Anyone seeking examples of how Middle Eastern rulers use oil wealth to keep popular discontents at bay need not look far. On 18 January 2011—just days after Ben Ali’s flight and a week before the onset of Egypt’s revolution—Kuwait’s government announced a grant of US\$3,500 to every man, woman, and child, as well as a year’s worth of free staples such as sugar, cooking oil, and milk. The following month, the Saudi government followed suit, announcing a \$80-billion package of public-sector wage hikes, unemployment payments, increased college stipends, and investments in low-income housing. In September 2011, the government of Qatar—not usually thought to be at risk of a popular uprising—declared that it would raise public-sector salaries and pensions by 60 percent, at a cost of more than \$8 billion.

Rentier states are good not only at handing out carrots, but also at piling up sticks. Michael Ross finds that “oil-poor Tunisia . . . spent \$53 per capita on its armed forces in 2008 [while] its oil-rich neighbor, Algeria, spent \$141 per capita and had far fewer protests.”<sup>6</sup> From 2006 to 2009, Saudi Arabia spent close to \$30 billion on arms imports. Over the same period, Bahrain spent more than \$14 billion and Algeria nearly \$7 billion for the same purpose. Saudi Arabia ranks among the top ten arms procurers worldwide, neck-and-neck with such major powers as India and Germany.<sup>7</sup>

**Dynasticism.** Buying guns is easy, however. Much harder is retaining the loyalty of those who are trained, organized, and paid to wield them on the state’s behalf. A truly predictive sign that such loyalty exists is the autocratic regime’s ability to transfer power smoothly from one member of the ruling family to another. Such a trouble-free transfer is the best *a priori* evidence that the coercive apparatus has pledged its fealty to the top family, and will thus likely go to serious lengths to guard it.

Why is hereditary succession such a strong sign of regime cohesion? In authoritarian regimes, successions are inherently perilous. Former allies plot against one another, and palace intrigues often mean that things end in ways that the departing autocrat neither expected nor desired. In the decades since the Second World War ended, transfers of executive power from fathers to sons have been rare.<sup>8</sup> Whether occurring by convention in monarchies or appearing as innovations in autocratic republics, such transfers signal that the state’s repressive agents have rallied around the executive (whether king or president) to an extraordinary degree.

Since Max Weber, social scientists have argued that rulers who concentrate power in their families—scholars of comparative politics call the resulting regimes “personalistic” or “sultanistic”—are less resilient than those who adhere to a more rational-legal tradition.<sup>9</sup> As Jack Goldstone recently put it:

Although such [sultanistic] regimes often appear unshakable, they are actually highly vulnerable, because the very strategies they use to stay in

power make them brittle, not resilient. It is no coincidence that although popular protests have shaken much of the Middle East, the only revolutions to succeed so far—those in Tunisia and Egypt—have been against modern sultans.<sup>10</sup>

We argue the opposite—the regimes of presidents Ben Ali and Mubarak fell *not* because they were too sultanistic, but rather because they were not sultanistic enough. Though Ben Ali and Mubarak were corrupt and nepotistic, their excesses were typical of conventional authoritarianism and did not rise (or sink) to the level of sultanism. What then separates a “sultan” from a run-of-the-mill autocrat? We argue that hereditary succession is the distinguishing mark. With this important conceptual refinement, it then becomes clear that there is a *positive* relationship between the intense personalism that characterizes true sultanistic regimes and the durability of those regimes.

To see the difference between a genuinely sultanistic regime and a merely authoritarian one, compare Mubarak’s Egypt and the Assads’ Syria. A pre-Arab Spring visitor to both countries would have been struck by how differently the executive’s family and his regime interacted. A study of high-level army officers in Syria would have turned up dozens of Assad relatives, including Maher, the younger brother of President Bashar al-Assad and the commander of the Republican Guard as well as of the army’s Fourth Armored Division. In Egypt, by contrast, one would have looked in vain for Mubarak’s kin among the ranks of the country’s top officers. These dissimilarities can be traced back to the 1990s, when Bashar and Maher’s father, President Hafiz al-Assad, was establishing familial rule with the consent of the Syrian military. The elder Assad made no attempt to hide his dynastic plans, putting forward his oldest son Basil as first choice. When Basil died in a 1994 car crash, Bashar began to appear with his father and dead brother in official iconography.<sup>11</sup> When Hafiz died in 2000, the security state’s notables backed Bashar and power stayed in Assad hands.<sup>12</sup>

Like Hafiz al-Assad, Mubarak also seems to have wanted his son to succeed him, but the topic in Egypt was far more fraught and the regime was far more coy about it. In 2005, Gamal Mubarak felt compelled to publicly dismiss the notion that he would ascend to the presidency.<sup>13</sup> By 2009, the elder Mubarak was deemed to have left the succession question in the hands of the security state, whose movers and shakers were widely thought to dislike the idea of Gamal ever taking power.<sup>14</sup> While the Mubaraks hesitated to enact dynasticism, the Assads plowed ahead, thanks to much stronger bonds between the executive and the repressive apparatus.

Hereditary handoffs are easily observed and measured. Thus we favor replacing the general notion of sultanism with the more precise and replicable indicator of “dynasticism,” defined simply as an instance of executive authority being inherited.<sup>15</sup> Where a dynasty exists, despotic

**TABLE—THE STRUCTURE OF ARAB REGIME CHANGE, 2010–12**

|                        | Major Oil Exporters  | Minor or Non-Oil Exporters                     |
|------------------------|--|--|
| Non-Hereditary Regimes | Algeria<br><i>Libya*</i>   | <i>Egypt</i><br><i>Tunisia</i><br><i>Yemen</i> |
| Hereditary Regimes     | <b>Bahrain</b><br>Kuwait<br>Oman<br>Qatar<br>Saudi Arabia<br>UAE | Jordan<br>Morocco<br><b>Syria</b>              |

power will follow. Far from being brittle, highly personalized regimes are actually stronger than their depersonalized counterparts. Whereas the latter may fracture in the face of protest, personalized regimes close ranks and fight.

We coded the fourteen Arab countries into two groups: those with and without an instance of hereditary succession *in the postcolonial period* (or in other words, since the early 1970s). Our periodization matters. Were one surveying Arab states in the 1950s and 1960s, one would have observed the dissolution of dynastic regimes in Egypt (1954), Iraq (1958), Libya (1969), Tunisia (1957), and Yemen (1968). Those regimes all differed crucially from present-day dynasties, however, for they were sustained not by purely domestic pacts between a family and the state apparatus, but by colonial powers as well. Today’s hereditary Arab regimes are the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states plus Jordan, Morocco, and Syria (the only republic among them).

### Explaining Outcomes

Based on our two explanatory variables, we sort the regimes of the Arab world into four families (see Table). We also identify the countries that experienced uprisings and regime change, the principal outcomes we seek to explain. A country’s name in boldface type indicates the presence of an “uprising.” Countries in italics experienced “regime change.” An asterisk (\*) indicates “foreign-imposed regime change” (FIRC). In the following sections, we discuss the relationship that our variables have to both the occurrence of uprisings, and the unseating of autocrats.

**Uprisings.** We define an uprising as a major type of contentious collective action marked by 1) the eruption of nonviolent mass protest over multiple days, 2) the spread of that protest across multiple geographical locations, and 3) the control by protesters of public places such as Cairo’s Tahrir Square, Manama’s Pearl Roundabout, or Tunis’s Bourguiba Avenue.<sup>16</sup> Uprisings depart from conventional demonstrations in their size, national resonance, and persistence. They differ from armed insurgencies in the methods used by their organizers. In Libya, Syria, and, to a lesser extent, Yemen, peaceful protest gave way to violent rebellion,

but the two phenomena are distinct. Militias can emerge without uprisings, and uprisings do not have to produce militias.

As our Table shows, uprisings occurred in every regime combination, hereditary or not, oil-rich or not. Tunisia's uprising began on 17 December 2010, and by early 2011 the ferment had spread to Egypt (January 25), Yemen (February 3), Bahrain (February 14), Libya (February 15), and Syria (March 15).

Strikingly, the protest wave touched various corners of the region almost without regard to structural preconditions. This suggests that new technologies and activist tactics enabled unprecedented challenges to authoritarian rule in unexpected places. Because the role of human agency and chance looms large, seeking a parsimonious theory of where uprisings will occur may be a fool's errand. That said, although there was no hard prerequisite, it does appear that uprisings were most likely to appear under nonhereditary authoritarian regimes without much oil wealth. Still, the massive uprisings in Libya, Bahrain, and Syria should caution against overinterpreting this pattern. Considering the full scope of cases, the biggest lesson is that agents, not structures, drove the uprisings. To invert Theda Skocpol's dictum about social revolutions, the Arab uprisings did not come, they were made.<sup>17</sup>

***Domestic Regime Change and Continuity.*** While the relationship between the main explanatory variables and the outbreak of uprisings is indeterminate, stronger correlations appear when we look at regime change. Though activists emerged everywhere, their aspirations were not self-fulfilling. Many who took to the streets in countries other than Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen underestimated the staying power of local regimes.<sup>18</sup>

We define regime change as the ousting of an authoritarian ruler and his inner circle (an assassination that leaves the top echelon in place does not count). For some, this may be too low a threshold, as it is possible for a leader and his coterie to depart without altering the underlying authoritarian infrastructure. But requiring Arab cases to clear a higher bar of substantive democratization might leave us with no cases of regime change at all. Among the countries that we cover, only Tunisia currently meets the minimal standards of electoral democracy. (Freedom House counted Libya as an electoral democracy in 2012, but that judgment appears premature given Libya's unresolved constitutional and institutional questions.) Still, the rupture of authoritarian regimes—even in the absence of democratization—is a rare and consequential enough outcome to warrant explanation.

In comparing instances of regime change with periods of regime continuity, we focus on *domestically driven* political transformations. These happen when a mass movement impels a leadership change. Although that change may be carried out by military figures, the element of social pressure is sufficient that the regime change is not a simple coup.



Tunisia (2010–11), Egypt (2011), and Yemen (2011–12) all underwent such domestically driven regime changes. In each case, the armed forces were instrumental in ushering a dictator from power, yet they were responding to a popular groundswell and moving without active foreign military assistance.

A second type of turnover is a FIRC. This involves one or more outside powers (hence the “foreign-imposed” part) and differs fundamentally from a purely internal overthrow.<sup>19</sup> The U.S.-led Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, which ousted Saddam Hussein, and the NATO-directed Operation Unified Protector of 2011, which enabled rebels to topple Muammar al-Qadhafi’s regime in Libya, are the most recent FIRCs in the region.

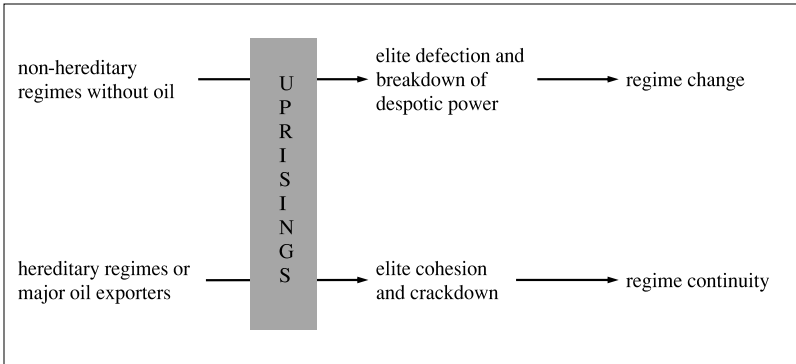
Cases where there was no regime change during the years 2010 through 2012 are Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates. Lack of regime change does not mean that these countries were politically stagnant. Even aside from the dramatic events in Bahrain and Syria, a number of Arab rulers flirted with reforms and allowed limited elections. Yet such initiatives, while *potentially* momentous, did not remove incumbents and may even have left them stronger.<sup>20</sup>

How does our explanatory framework account for the variation in outcomes? As the Table shows, oil exporters were able to withstand the shocks of domestic protest—the one exception was Qadhafi’s Libyan dictatorship, which fell only after the world’s strongest military alliance launched a sustained aerial-bombing campaign against it. There is more variation, though, among oil-poor regimes. Civilian dissidents and disgruntled generals replaced dictators in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen. The hereditary regimes of Jordan, Morocco, and Syria, on the other hand, remain in place (the last at a terrible and mounting cost in human life). The pattern of regime stability during 2010–12 was that *either* oil wealth *or* hereditary rule was enough to preserve authoritarian continuity unless outside powers intervened.

## Pathways of Causation

There were two paths through which regime traits determined whether mass protests would deliver political change. The first was when the state’s coercive apparatus shifted in favor of toppling the executive. The second was when that apparatus remained loyal and cracked down on the opposition. The former path entailed the breakdown of despotic power; the latter entailed its use to devastating effect. We now trace these paths in the six cases of regime-challenging protest movements: Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen.

***Opposition success in the nonhereditary, oil-poor regimes.*** Prior to December 2010, few would have deemed the Tunisian, Egyptian, or Yemeni regimes vulnerable to revolt. Yet each of these security states

**FIGURE—CAUSAL PATHWAYS OF THE ARAB SPRING**

depended on a coalition that proved susceptible to fissuring when the people arose. In none of the three had the coercive apparatus previously united behind the ruler in a hereditary succession. In addition, presidents Ben Ali, Mubarak, and Saleh had limited rents with which they could buy military loyalty or social quiescence.

In Tunisia, Ben Ali used as much despotic power as he could muster, but the backstop of the coercive apparatus, the uniformed military, soon abandoned him. A week into the uprising, Interior Ministry forces began firing live bullets. Two demonstrators were shot dead on December 24; in the weeks that followed, more than two hundred would die.<sup>21</sup> On January 9, regime forces fired on demonstrators in the city of Kasserine, and three days later Ben Ali ordered the army to move into the city.<sup>22</sup> The order backfired. The top general, Rachid Ammar, not only refused Ben Ali's order but deployed soldiers to shield protesters from further Interior Ministry assaults. The president fled to Saudi Arabia on January 14, and the military let him go.

General Ammar's counterpart in Egypt, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, also bowed to popular pressure and forced out a long-ruling president.<sup>23</sup> After demonstrators in Cairo overran police vehicles and security men on January 29, Mubarak's interior minister told him that events had spun out of control. Mubarak ordered a nationwide military deployment, only to have protesters and the army defy him with a mutual embrace. On January 31, Tantawi declared that the army backed the revolution and would not shoot. The next evening, Mubarak tried to mollify his angry people by vowing that neither he nor his son would run in the next election, but the crowds did not abate. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), comprising Egypt's twenty highest-ranking uniformed officers, met on February 10 and declared that it would work to protect what the protesters had achieved. On February 11, it announced that it would oversee a transition to a new constitution, free elections, and an eventual end to the hated state of emergency. Later that day, Vice-President Omar Suleiman revealed that Mubarak had stepped down.

Compared to his counterparts in Tunis and Cairo, Yemen's President Ali Abdallah Saleh had gone much farther toward establishing familial rule. He had seen to it that most military officers were members of his own tribe, and had placed a nephew and a son, respectively, atop the Central Security Service and the Republican Guard. Yet Saleh had not managed to forge an Assad-like coalition behind his offspring. On the contrary, power players such as the country's leading business family had made clear their opposition to any dynastic project. Saleh might have wielded significant despotic power, but he could not command the kind of loyalty that Hafiz al-Assad had known.

Demonstrations began in Sana'a on January 15, the day after Tunisians ousted Ben Ali. Protests spread into February, prompting Saleh to pledge that he would not seek reelection in 2013.<sup>24</sup> This worked no better on Yemenis than it had on Egyptians. Activists insisted that Saleh should go immediately and mobilized twenty-thousand people for a "Day of Rage" on February 3. In general, Saleh retained the overall support of the armed forces, which are 138,000-strong (in a country of 23 million). The main exception to military loyalty was General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, a tribal confederate of Saleh's who commanded a division of the army used against protesters in Sana'a.<sup>25</sup> In March, Ahmar joined the call for Saleh to resign.

After a failed assassination attempt in early June, the president was rushed to Saudi Arabia for medical care. Despite U.S. urgings that he step down and accept a transition plan put forward by Saudi Arabia and the GCC—which offered him and his family immunity from prosecution—it was not until November 23 that he finally acquiesced. On 21 February 2012, Vice-President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi was elected (unopposed) to the presidency as a "consensus candidate" of the regime and opposition. This was enough to put Yemen in the regime-change category, though the country cannot be considered promising ground for democracy.

***Crackdowns in hereditary or oil-rich regimes.*** In the remaining cases where protest occurred, regimes benefited from firm coalitions backing the dynasty (Syria), oil largesse (Libya), or both (Bahrain). These traits enabled them to hold the repressive apparatus together during major uprisings and to lash out violently against the opposition. The record so far is that such repression has been enough to keep rulers in power unless foreign military forces intervene, as happened in Libya.

Hafiz al-Assad maintained one of the most active and politically loyal militaries in the Middle East, using it to wage war against Israel in 1973, to crush the Muslim Brotherhood in the city of Hama in 1982 (killing as many as thirty-thousand people), and to establish Syrian hegemony in Lebanon. By 2010, Syria had a larger military per capita than any of our other core cases: more than 400,000 troops for a population of 22 million. As a result of France's colonial policy, the country's senior officers had long been disproportionately drawn from the Alawite religious

minority. Hafiz al-Assad, an Alawite and an air force general, carefully maintained this custom.<sup>26</sup> It proved a good investment for the regime, creating a reservoir of determined support for despotism that smoothed Bashar's succession to the presidency and supported his continued rule after protest and then armed resistance broke out in 2011.

The major demonstrations began on 15 March 2011, as another of the Arab world's by now familiar "Days of Rage." The regime's response was draconian. Five people were killed in the southwestern town of Deraa, which was then sealed off. After laying siege to Deraa in April, tanks moved against towns around the country in subsequent months. While opposition movements inside the country and abroad were pushing reforms or seeking ways to usher Bashar al-Assad from power, the Syrian president was unleashing heavy weapons to keep his seat.

Aside from a few isolated military defections, the armed forces continued to back the regime. Further, the core of the repressive machine—the Republican Guards and the intelligence services—stood behind Bashar, as did his foreign enablers Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia. As 2013 wore on, things seemed unlikely to tip in the opposition's favor, despite aid from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, among others. It seemed that absent something like a major foreign air campaign on the order of the one seen in Libya, the Assads would stay.

Whether or not Assad and his entourage survive the current war is as much a question of military as of political science, but here too the comparative evidence underscores the resilience, not the fragility, of the regime. The armed Syrian opposition has failed so far to hold major swaths of territory, while the regime has succeeded in keeping its military cohesive and active. This outcome of regime durability during crisis merits attention. The regime's dynastic nature and the dynamics this implies go far toward explaining it.

In Bahrain, the Sunni Khalifa family epitomizes dynasticism. Princes hold all top government posts. Unlike Syria, however, the Bahraini regime also benefits from significant oil wealth that enables it to hire foreign mercenaries for domestic repression (Pakistan is a popular recruiting spot). Bahrain had its own "Day of Rage" on 14 February 2011. Tens of thousands called for reform—including the replacement of hard-line prime minister Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa—rather than regime change. The government responded with violence; seven protesters lost their lives during the uprising's first four days. Yet the movement pressed on, soon drawing Shia parliamentarians and members of the judiciary to its cause. Demonstrators occupied the Pearl Roundabout, Manama's version of Tahrir Square. The regime made no major concessions.<sup>27</sup>

In mid-March, soldiers from the Bahraini Defense Forces began clearing the roundabout by force while a thousand Saudi troops crossed the King Fahd Causeway and took up posts guarding key government sites. They were joined by five-hundred UAE soldiers and a small Qa-

tari contingent, with Kuwait providing naval support. Within days, the roundabout was empty, hundreds of activists were under arrest, and several leading regime opponents were facing military trials.<sup>28</sup>

**Explaining Libya.** If we are right that oil wealth is enough to stave off regime change, then the outcome of the Libyan revolution requires explanation. Since seizing power in 1969, Qadhafi had used oil wealth and his own unique brand of populism to keep Libyans atomized while building up a vast coercive apparatus.<sup>29</sup> The country should thus have gone the way of Bahrain rather than Egypt or Tunisia. Instead, the Libyan revolution ended with Qadhafi dead by the side of a road. Why?

We argue that, without NATO's intervention, Qadhafi and his regime would have survived. The armed resistance that he faced was mainly limited to eastern Libya, and unable to topple the regime on its own. Some of Qadhafi's armed units in the east did defect in February 2011, but much of the coercive apparatus was bound to him by regional and tribal ties and stayed loyal. By mid-March, Qadhafi was poised to regain control of the east by attacking Benghazi. It was this prospect—and the threat of subsequent massacres—that finally spurred the United States to support the imposition of a UN-backed no-fly zone, forcing Libya into the regime-change category.

### Are Structural Factors Key?

This essay has offered a theory of regime change and continuity based on two preexisting regime traits: oil wealth and hereditary rule. These structural characteristics do not account for the emergence of popular protest—that seems to depend on local activists. These factors do, however, help to explain the wide array of outcomes among the six Arab countries that experienced uprisings. In particular, they offer new insights regarding how and why Arab militaries and security forces—under pressure from the streets—either obeyed their rulers, or ousted them.

The Arab Spring produced such a modest harvest because regimes continued to benefit from reservoirs of rents and repressive capacity, the same characteristics that many scholars cited to explain the prevalence of authoritarianism in the region *before* the uprisings began. In this sense, the limited scope of regime change requires us to take a second look at the historic sources of autocratic resilience.

While striving for parsimony, we are able to reconcile anomalies raised by prior arguments and to make progress toward a more integrated theoretical approach to regime change. If oil exports scotched uprisings, why has the Syrian regime lasted so long against its domestic opponents? If Arab republics were more vulnerable, why, again, have Syria and Algeria avoided regime change? The answer, we find, comes from considering hereditary rule—whether in its monarchic *or* its “republican” permutations—as a sign of unusually strong ties between the ruler and the repressive appa-

ratus. Further, dynasticism and oil rents operate as complementary, rather than competing, variables. *Either* characteristic is enough to ensure that the regime will retain power, while a regime without either will fall quickly once popular pressure and military defections begin to mount.

In terms of revising prior expectations, our theory yields two major lessons. The first is about personal rule, while the second concerns the importance of foreign interventions. By homing in on dynasticism, instead of sultanism, comparativists can more readily distinguish polities with “normal” levels of authoritarian corruption from those where the ruler fuses his family into the regime. Further, the fragility of the most personalistic of dictatorships may have been exaggerated. Dynasticism bonds autocrats and agents of repression. Such regimes may eventually fall, but they will only go down violently.

Regarding FIRC, it appears that foreign interventions in the Middle East and North Africa serve as the *deus ex machina* for embattled oppositionists. Whether in Iraq in 2003 or Libya in 2011, military campaigns spearheaded (or, in the latter case, at least supported) by the United States effectively overrode the domestic factors that had produced a severe imbalance between oil-fed security states and long-repressed dissidents. The premise of the Obama administration’s decision to back a no-fly zone in Libya was that the Libyan uprising would have been crushed without foreign military help. Our analytical framework supports that claim. By extension, one may reach a similar conclusion about the Syrian rebellion in 2013.

Here one may ask whether the Bahraini case, with its Saudi-led intervention, defies our logic: Was not foreign intervention needed to *rescue* a major oil exporter from domestically driven change? A comparison of the NATO intervention in Libya and the GCC intervention in Bahrain offers an explanation. In Libya, foreign militaries took the lead in bringing the regime to heel, whereas in Bahrain, it was domestic police and soldiers who were out front bludgeoning the regime’s critics. The GCC troops were mere auxiliaries. This account does not ignore the GCC’s support for a bloody crackdown, but it assigns the dominant causal role to the local regime.

As Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen attempt to move forward, all ears are listening for the dogs that have not yet barked. Many think that it is only a matter of time before the doleful dynastic stability of Jordan, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia gives way to popular demands for dignity and freedom. This may be so. But our theory predicts that these regimes will not respond to such challenges by turning in on themselves, packing the autocrat off to exile, and negotiating the dismantling of the old order. Monarchies that have ruled for the better part of 250 years in Saudi Arabia, 400 in Morocco, or 100 in Jordan, and gathered into their hands all the threads of power and privilege, will not go quietly.

These sobering predictions are a useful corrective to the sunny optimism that the Arab Spring initially inspired. The breathtaking spectacle of peaceful young crowds triumphing over long-entrenched dictators

suggested—misleadingly—that an inexorable march toward democracy had begun. The Arab Spring’s meager yield—a bitter litany of failed uprisings, halting or reversed “transitions,” and autocratic continuity—suggests that a less teleological process is at work, and that inherited political structures remain critically important.

## NOTES

The authors wish to thank Jack Goldstone, Dan Slater, Joshua Stacher, Nicolas van de Walle, and participants at workshops at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill and the University of Texas–Austin for constructive comments on earlier versions of this essay.

1. Eva Bellin, “Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring,” *Comparative Politics* 44 (January 2012): 127–49.

2. Sean L. Yom and F. Gregory Gause III, “Resilient Royals: How Arab Monarchies Hang On,” *Journal of Democracy* 23 (October 2012): 74–88; Michael L. Ross, “Will Oil Drown the Arab Spring? Democracy and the Resource Curse,” *Foreign Affairs* 90 (September–October 2011): 2–7.

3. Ross, “Will Oil Drown the Arab Spring?” 5.

4. Hossein Mahdavy, “The Patterns and Problems of Economic Development in Rentier States: The Case of Iran,” in M.A. Cook, ed., *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East from the Rise of Islam to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 428–67; Lisa Anderson, “The State in the Middle East and North Africa,” *Comparative Politics* 20 (October 1987): 1–18.

5. Michael L. Ross, “Does Oil Hinder Democracy?” *World Politics* 53 (April 2011): 325–61.

6. Ross, “Will Oil Drown the Arab Spring?” 4.

7. Richard F. Grimmett, *Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2002–2009* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2010), 44. For Saudi Arabia’s global ranking as an arms buyer, see [www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/resultoutput/milex\\_15/the-15-countries-with-the-highest-military-expenditure-in-2011-table/view](http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/resultoutput/milex_15/the-15-countries-with-the-highest-military-expenditure-in-2011-table/view).

8. Jason Brownlee, “Hereditary Succession in Modern Autocracies,” *World Politics* 59 (July 2007): 595–628.

9. Juan J. Linz, “Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes,” in Fred I. Greenstein and Nelson W. Polsby, eds., *Handbook of Political Science, Volume 3: Macropolitical Theory* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1975), 175–357.

10. Jack A. Goldstone, “Understanding the Revolutions of 2011: Weakness and Resilience in Middle Eastern Autocracies,” *Foreign Affairs* 90 (May–June 2011): 8.

11. Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

12. Joshua Stacher, “Reinterpreting Authoritarian Power: Syria’s Hereditary Succession,” *Middle East Journal* 65 (Spring 2011): 197–212.

13. Summer Said, “Mubarak to Name Vice-President After September Elections,” *Arab News*, 16 June 2005, available at [www.arabnews.com/node/268587](http://www.arabnews.com/node/268587).

14. Available at [www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=09CAIRO874&q=gamal%20mubarak](http://www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=09CAIRO874&q=gamal%20mubarak).
15. We thank Alfred Stepan for encouraging us to narrow the range of what we mean by "sultanism." Note that our sense of the term leaves out such corrupt but nonhereditary regimes as the Philippines under Ferdinand Marcos and the Dominican Republic under Rafael Trujillo while still including the Somozas' Nicaragua and the Duvaliers' Haiti.
16. Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, "Dynamics of Contention," *Social Movement Studies* 2 (April 2003): 99–102.
17. Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
18. Kurt Weyland, "The Arab Spring: Why the Surprising Similarities with the Revolutionary Wave of 1848?" *Perspectives on Politics* 10 (December 2012): 917–34; Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
19. Suzanne Werner, "Absolute and Limited War: The Possibility of Foreign-Imposed Regime Change," *International Interactions* 22 (July 1996): 67–88; Alexander B. Downes and Jonathan Monten, "Forced to Be Free? Why Foreign-Imposed Regime Change Rarely Leads to Democratization," *International Security* 37 (Spring 2013): 90–131.
20. Daniel Brumberg, "Survival Strategies vs. Democratic Bargains: The Politics of Economic Reform in Contemporary Egypt," in Henri Barkey, ed., *The Politics of Economic Reform in the Middle East* (New York: St. Martin's, 1992), 73–104.
21. Peter J. Schraeder and Hamadi Redissi, "The Upheavals in Egypt and Tunisia: Ben Ali's Fall," *Journal of Democracy* 22 (July 2011): 5–19.
22. Joel Beinin and Frédéric Vairel, eds., *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).
23. Tarek Masoud, "The Upheavals in Egypt and Tunisia: The Road to (and from) Liberation Square," *Journal of Democracy* 22 (July 2011): 20–34.
24. International Crisis Group, "Popular Protests in the Middle East and North Africa (III): The Bahrain Revolt," *ICG Middle East Report*, No. 105, 6 April 2011.
25. Zoltan Barany, "Comparing the Arab Revolts: The Role of the Military," *Journal of Democracy* 22 (October 2011): 24–35.
26. Ayse Tekdal Fildis, "Roots of Alawite-Sunni Rivalry in Syria," *Middle East Policy* 19 (Summer 2012): 148–56; Daniel Pipes, "The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria," *Middle Eastern Studies* 25 (October 1989): 429–50.
27. International Crisis Group, "Popular Protests in the Middle East and North Africa (III): The Bahrain Revolt."
28. Scheherezade Faramarzi, "Clampdown in Bahrain: When Protesters Called for a Republic, the U.S. Position Changed, Allowing a Saudi Invasion," *Nation*, 12 September 2011, 41–42.
29. Dirk Vandewalle, *Libya Since Independence: Oil and State Building* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).



Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.