The people want the fall of the regime...or not: explaining the diffusion of the Arab Spring

Michael Herb
Georgia State University
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Abstract

Why did Arab citizens, in the spring of 2011, demand the fall of some regimes, but not others? To explain this puzzle I draw on the lessons of the literature on the diffusion of similar revolutionary shocks, especially the revolutions of 1848 and the Color Revolutions in post-Communist states in the 2000s. The Arab Spring, like the revolutions of 1848, spread very rapidly. In effect, the Arab Spring started with a series of snap referendums on each Arab regime. Some countries were tinderboxes, ready to explode; elsewhere the Arab Spring fizzled out. I argue that the decision by citizens to demand the fall of the regime (or not) is largely explained by regime type: in the Arab world in the spring of 2011 public opinion was hostile to presidents, and less hostile to monarchs, for reasons having to do with the perceived prospects for reform of different regime types and their previous records. The exceptions, such as Bahrain and Algeria, occurred where the perceived virtues of monarchism (or vices of presidentialism) had less sway over the decisions made by potential protesters. I trace this to factors rooted in the specific political histories of the countries that did not follow the general pattern.
In early 2011 why did the citizens of some Arab countries pour into the street demanding the fall of their regimes, while in other Arab countries they demanded only reforms, or stayed home altogether? This remains one of the central puzzles of the Arab Spring.1 Brownlee, Masoud and Reynolds contemplate the pattern of protests (and their absence) across the region and write that "the protest wave touched various corners of the region almost without regard to structural preconditions." They posit that "seeking a parsimonious theory" of uprisings in authoritarian regimes "may be a fool's errand."2 In this article I engage on this errand. While I do not make a strong claim to parsimony, I do offer an explanation for the pattern of uprisings in the spring of 2011. In explaining the diffusion of the Arab Spring I draw on the literature on what Tarrow has called “modular” political phenomena: political events that feature the diffusion of a model across borders in a manner that makes it clear that the diffusion of the model has an important causal impact on outcomes.3 Earlier examples of the diffusion of a revolutionary impulse include the revolutions of 1848 and the Color Revolutions in post-

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1 I prefer here "Arab Spring" to “Arab Uprisings.” It is more inclusive, since uprisings occurred only in some countries. It is the most widely phrase in Arabic by far, according to Google counts of search results for al-rabi’ al-arabi. ("Arab revolutions," al-thawrat al-arabiya, is the runner up, and al-intifadhat al-arabiya lags far behind). Finally, it is evocative of the "springtime of peoples" of 1848, which is in some ways the most comparable political phenomenon.


Communist regimes.

In the diffusion of models across borders, different causal factors can be important at different points in the process of diffusion. This is crucial for understanding how the Arab Spring played out across the Arab World. Explanations for the events of the Arab Spring must distinguish between several distinct phenomena which occurred in roughly sequential order. First, citizens decided whether to protest and what demands to make. Second, if large numbers demanded the fall of the regime, the military responded to the protests (sometimes by taking the protesters’ side, sometimes not). Third, where civil wars broke out, foreign powers decided whether to intervene. The causal factors in each stage vary, and for this reason cannot be collapsed. In this article I focus on the first stage only, the initial spread of protests.

I make three arguments concerning the pattern of the initial spread of the Arab Spring. First, citizens decided very quickly whether or not they would protest, and what they would demand if they did protest (with the exception of Syria). Some countries were tinderboxes waiting for a match (which the Tunisians provided) while others very clearly were not. The speed of developments strongly suggests that in most cases the regime did not have enough time to decisively affect the size and nature of protests. Instead, the diffusion of the Tunisian model can usefully be thought of as a surprise referendum on the question of the fall of the regime. Where many citizens (especially in the capital) wanted the fall of the regime, they came out and demanded it. There is not much evidence that hurried offers of reform, or bribes, mattered

4 Beissinger, “Structure and Example in Modular Political Phenomena,” 266.

much in this initial decision.

Second, the decision of protesters to take to the streets demanding the fall of the regime was not driven primarily by the perceived fearsomeness of the regime, or its durability: in 2011, as in 1848, for a moment all regimes looked fragile, as Weyland points out. What did matter was whether or not the citizens of each country thought that their country would be better off without the "regime," which in practice meant the head of state. This is not the same as the popularity of the regime, though some regimes clearly enjoyed more support than others; the attractiveness of perceived alternatives to the existing regime also mattered.

Third, the preferences of potential protesters regarding the fall of the regime were shaped more by factors arising from regime type and political history than by factors derived from the level of oil revenues or other similar structural factors. Protesters targeted presidents, but not monarchs: oil rents were less important.

This paper is divided into three parts, following the three points above. In the first I examine how the Arab Spring diffused: I examine the timing, size and demands made in the initial protests, and regime responses. In the second I set out several economic and political explanations of this pattern. In the third I return to the cases, asking what variables, or combinations of variables, best explain the choices made by potential protesters to demand the fall of their regime or not.

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**Surprise referendums**

On January 14, 2011, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled Tunisia, setting off what can usefully be thought of as snap referendums on the leaders of each Arab regime. The citizens of some Arab countries, faced with an unexpected opportunity to challenge their rulers, declined. Others seized an unexpected opportunity and poured into the streets by the thousands.

**The people want the fall of the regime**

In Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Sudan and Bahrain, anti-regime demonstrators made it clear from almost the beginning that they sought the fall of the regime. In all but Sudan, the initial demonstrations were large and posed and immediate threat to the regime.

The case of Tunisia, of course, differs from the others because it went first: Tunisians discovered the unexpected fragility of Arab regimes. Nonetheless there are several points of comparison with the experience of other Arab countries that bear emphasis. First, when Tunisians realized that they might be able to be rid of Ben Ali, they embraced the idea with a vengeance and, as important, almost no one came out to defend him. In one particularly telling episode the secretary-general of the ruling party called regime supporters to demonstrate in central Tunis. Anti-regime protesters held a counter-demonstration: the putative regime supporters joined them in raising calls for the fall of the regime. Second, it is hard to make a case that the Tunisian regime sealed its fate through brutal repression of protesters. Most accounts mention only two deaths of protesters at the hands of the police before the regime's collapse.

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last week in power. These occurred on December 24th. Up to 50 died during the last weekend of Ben Ali’s rule. Third, Ben Ali did not wholly ignore the protests. He visited Mohamed Bouazizi in the hospital on the 28th of December and received his mother in the presidential palace on the same day. These gestures largely fell on deaf ears: they were too late to change the opinion Tunisians had already formed of their leader, a problem that other Arab leaders would soon encounter.

After the 14th of January all Arab rulers appeared to be vulnerable – public opinion had previously overrated the stability of regimes, and now failed to distinguish between the ones that were still resilient and those which were not. Kurt Weyland, in his discussion of the 1848 revolutions, argues that citizens displayed bounded rationality in their responses to the initial trigger of the (which was the fall of the French monarchy). These responses relied on "simplifying heuristics that can entail distortions and biases." The fall of the French monarchy "made many people jump to the conclusion that a similar regime change could occur in their state. This unthinking belief overwhelmed prudence, inspired enthusiasm ... and triggered a riptide of regime contention that extended far beyond the settings that rational assessments would regard as propitious." In a later article he extends this argument to the Arab Spring,  


10 This was January 8-10. International Crisis Group, Tunisia’s Way, 5.


arguing – plausibly – that Arab publics were also captured by the enthusiasm of the moment: "the Tunisian and subsequent Egyptian example inspired the rash view that rulers across the Arab world were vulnerable...." Protesters assumed that the shockingly swift and utterly unexpected fall of the Tunisian regime meant that virtually all Arab regimes were weaker than had been previously thought, and all could potentially be overthrown from the street. In some countries citizens, unhappy with their regimes to start with, enthusiastically embraced an unexpected opportunity to overthrow the regime. Elsewhere citizens let the opportunity pass. All regimes looked vulnerable, but not all citizens wanted to take advantage of that vulnerability.

Protests in Egypt broke out eleven days after the fall of Ben Ali, on the 25th of January. Those demonstrations were a major success. Three days later, on the 28th, vast crowds demanded the fall of the regime – and defeated the efforts of the police to control the crowds. It is not hard to find fault with Mubarak’s response to the protests, but it is also the case that he had very, very little time. The size and vehemence of the initial protests suggests that there was little Mubarak could have done to propitiate his people after Ben Ali’s fall. In a speech on January 29th he dismissed his government; in a second speech on February 1st he promised not to run for president in the next election, scheduled for the fall. A few days later, on the 5th, his son Gamal resigned from the leadership of the ruling party. These were substantial concessions, but they hardly moved public opinion. The next day, on the 2nd, thousands came

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15 Ibid., 5, 8, 10 footnote 98.
out on the streets to demonstrate in favor of the regime.\textsuperscript{16} Such protesters, however, were probably outnumbered – and certainly overshadowed – by a large contingent of regime thugs who set about attacking the anti-regime protesters in Tahrir Square. Few pro-regime demonstrations occurred after the 2\textsuperscript{nd}. While the regime perhaps could have done a better job of getting its supporters (rather than its thugs) onto the streets, the regime also suffered from the same problem suffered by the Tunisian leadership: its supporters were outnumbered by its opponents in both numbers and enthusiasm. One Egyptian official, comparing Egypt with Iran's demonstrations a few years earlier, said that "In Iran, the regime still has a significant number of supporters. In Egypt, there's nothing."\textsuperscript{17}

The first anti-regime protests in Libya broke out in the east shortly after Mubarak's fall. Within a week Benghazi had fallen, and hundreds were dead.\textsuperscript{18} In these initial protests the crowds chanted slogans that included the bracing assertion that "There is no God but God, and Muammar is the enemy of God."\textsuperscript{19} It is true that the regime cracked down viciously on the protesters from the very beginning, but the evidence suggests that the protesters in the east had made up their minds about the regime: events in Egypt triggered a fight to the death in Benghazi between regime opponents and supporters. Perhaps less regime violence would have made the


\textsuperscript{17} International Crisis Group, \textit{Egypt Victorious?}, 3 fn. 23.


protesters less angry. But 40 years and more of Muammar Gaddafi had made them angry enough already ("...Muammar is the enemy of God") and less initial repression was not likely to change the opinion of Benghazi residents about the benefits of being rid of Gaddafi.  

Gaddafi, unlike the rulers of Tunisia and Egypt, had abundant oil wealth. He did not offer to hand out cash before demonstrations broke out, as did the king of Bahrain. But he did encourage the youth to "take what was rightfully theirs" when discussing housing shortages in a speech on the 26th of January: some Libyans responded by seizing empty houses. On the 22nd of February the regime suggested salaries would be raised. Again, perhaps Gaddafi could have headed off protests if he had handed out more money in January and early February (or handed it out in a more sensible way). But one doubts that, after more than four decades of Gaddafi, Libyans could be so easily bribed out of their best opportunity to be rid of him and his regime.

Yemenis made their feelings about President Ali Abdullah Saleh clear in the first days of protests, which broke out even before Mubarak's fall. A few protesters came out on the 15th of January, more on the 20th and then thousands on the 29th of January. Protest organizers did not call for Saleh's ouster, but from the beginning the central demand of protesters on the street was clear: they wanted Saleh gone. As in Egypt and Libya, the speed of the emergence of major protests demanding the ouster of the president suggests that the driving factor was not Saleh's reaction to the protests but instead the state of public opinion when the Tunisian shock arrived.

20 For a different view, see Lynch, The Arab Uprising, 112.

21 International Crisis Group, Making Sense of Libya, 2.

22 Ibid., 3.

Saleh reacted to the protests with alacrity. On the 2nd of February he promised not to seek reelection and promised "no family succession" in a speech to a joint session of the legislature (this was the day after Mubarak promised not to run again for president).\textsuperscript{24} Saleh separately promised a raft of economic giveaways.\textsuperscript{25} (Because he had promised to step down before, and because the state had little money, these promises had limited credibility). The Yemeni regime turned out a large pro-government demonstration on the 3rd of February (again, the day following the disastrous pro-regime demonstrations in Cairo). Some were paid by the regime, but the size of the demonstration indicated that a substantial number of Yemenis supported the regime and were willing to say so loudly.\textsuperscript{26} Saleh presided over a country that was divided in its opinion of him: the armed forces were similarly divided, and this drove the later development of the Arab Spring in Yemen.\textsuperscript{27}

The king of Bahrain tried to head of protests with a cash grant of over $2600 to each Bahraini family: this was announced before protests broke out gut had little impact.\textsuperscript{28} The problem was summarized by an opposition leader, "Poor people took the money, but are still insisting on getting political reform." A protest leader, in response to a later effort in March to appease protesters with handouts: pointed out that "this is about dignity and freedom – it's not

\textsuperscript{24} Speech of the President to the Majlis Al-Nuwwab and Majlis Al-Shura 2 February 2011, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fxtTm3EkNI.

\textsuperscript{25} International Crisis Group, Yemen between Reform and Revolution, 8.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 7.

\textsuperscript{27} This split was precipitated by mass regime killing of protesters in Sana’a; the repression, however, was not crucial because it generated more protests, but because it precipitated a split within the regime.

about filling our stomachs."\textsuperscript{29}

On the 14th of February – a few days after the fall of Mubarak – Bahrainis took to the streets by the tens of thousands for a "Day of Rage." Protesters limited their "demands to political and democratic reforms, refraining from directly criticizing King Hamad."\textsuperscript{30} But the police killed two protesters, and two days later, in the Pearl Roundabout, protesters raised chants for the fall of regime.\textsuperscript{31} These calls intensified after the bloody crackdown in the early morning of the next day that left at least five dead.\textsuperscript{32} The change in the tone of the protesters' demands is attributed, by several observers, to the regime’s quick resort to repression. Yet the notion that the main causal factor in the radicalizing of the protesters was police repression is unconvincing; the argument trivializes the causal role of the entire political history of Bahrain before the 14\textsuperscript{th} of February. The police may have triggered the protesters’ decision to call for the fall of the regime, but it was the regime, in the decades before the spring of 2011, that primed

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} Michael Slackman and Nadim Audi, “Riot Police in Early Morning Raid on Bahrain Protesters,” \textit{The New York Times}, February 16, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/17/world/middleeast/17bahrain.html. (This article, dated the 16\textsuperscript{th} in New York, reports events in the early morning hours of the 17\textsuperscript{th} in Bahrain.)
\end{itemize}
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Bahraini public opinion to turn against the ruling family.

Over the next month or so, until the Saudi intervention on March 14th, Bahrain’s leading opposition group, the Shi’i Islamist Al-Wefaq, limited its demands to political reform: despite the enthusiasm of the moment, its leaders had an understanding of the hard political realities of the situation.33 Others, including protesters on the streets, did not. On the 7th of March several opposition groups announced the formation of a "Coalition for a Bahraini Republic": its very name was an explicit call for the fall of the regime.34 On the 11th protesters marched toward the king’s palace, on the 13th they barricaded the Bahrain Financial Harbour: both actions were seen as provocations by radicals intent on changing the regime.35 But the protesters overreached, misreading the differences between the Bahraini regime and those of Tunisia and Egypt. The next day the Saudis intervened and the Arab Spring in Bahrain came to an end. Throughout, the anger of the protesters toward the regime was matched by the equally fervent support of Sunnis for their ruling family – or at least fervent support for avoiding a fall of the regime and the ascendance of the Shi'i majority.36 There was nothing like the revolutionary


consensus seen in Tunisia or Egypt.

In Sudan, on January 30th, a few thousand protesters came out onto the streets in Khartoum demanding a change in the "government," and a coalition of opposition parties threatened to call for the overthrow of the regime if its demand were not met.37 On the 1st of February, al-Jazeera reported that there was a Facebook page with 16,000 members demanding the overthrow of the president.38 In short, Sudan seemed to have a core of activists who were prepared to demand the "fall of the regime." What was missing was a mass of protesters willing to come out onto the streets: the early protests fizzled out. This is partly explained by the regime's comparative restraint in using lethal force: the police did not shoot and kill any protesters on the 30th, though it did arrest hundreds, many of whom were tortured in custody.39 In terms of the structural characteristics of the regime Sudan was a more propitious environment for revolution than, say, Bahrain or Libya, and perhaps street protests could have induced the army to turn on president Bashir.40 But apparently not many Sudanese had the
appetite to try to make this happen.

**The people want the reform of the regime**

In its highly contagious first weeks, the Arab Spring triggered protests in several other Arab countries. Some of demonstrations were large: many more Moroccans came out onto the streets than did Tunisians. But while protesters in Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain quickly called for the fall of the regime, protesters in these counties did not. This is not because their rulers were unusually quick to offer concessions (though some were) or because they used notably less force in repressing the demonstrations. Instead, it appears that most of those who came out onto the streets simply were not enthusiastic about the "fall of the regime."

In *Algeria*, crowds were on the streets even before Ben Ali fell in neighboring Tunisia. Like the early protests in Tunisia, the Algerian protesters focused on basic economic issues: the regime responded by slashing taxes on sugar and cooking oil.41 The middle class did not join these protests (in contrast to Tunisia) and the early protests faded away. On February 12th (the day after the fall of Mubarak) around 3,000 mostly middle class protesters turned out in central Algiers. Some working class counter-protesters also appeared, and the two groups exchanged insults.42 (In Tunisia, middle class and lower class protesters joined forces.) A leader of the FIS services. International Crisis Group, *Divisions in Sudan’s Ruling Party and the Threat to the Country’s Stability*, May 4, 2011, i, 14, http://www.crisisgroup.org/.


also showed up, to the dismay of more secular demonstrators, who pushed him and dozens of his supporters to the side. Small protests continued, but it was clear that, if the Tunisian model was a match, there was nothing much ready to catch fire in Algeria.

The Algerian regime’s response to the Arab Spring included economic concessions such as the tax cuts mentioned above. Later on, after the peak of contagion, the regime spent a great deal of oil wealth on its citizens. But this was later. In the most dangerous weeks the regime offered one main political reform: a repeal of the state of emergency (which was, in any case, replaced by laws that had much the same effect). Hosni Mubarak and Ali Abdullah Saleh made far greater concessions far more quickly.

Al-Jazeera reported numerous protests in Iraq from early February. The first major demonstration clearly modeled after those in other Arab countries was on the 25th of February – two weeks after Mubarak’s fall. Al-Jazeera, in its coverage of the protests, looked for evidence that protesters sought the fall of the regime. The crowds in the street, however, focused their complaints on government services, provincial leaders, corruption, and the like. By March it became clear that while the Tunisian events triggered protests, it would not generate widespread calls for the fall of the regime in Iraq.

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43 Volpi, “Algeria versus the Arab Spring,” 109.
45 Zoubir and Aghrout, “Algeria’s Path to Reform,” 71.
The Iraqi regime did not have a light touch with protesters. On the 25th of February, 12 died during demonstrations around Iraq. The regime offered some reforms and concessions, though not anything on the scale of concessions made in Egypt or Yemen. Some provincial officials resigned, and the prime minister told the members of his government to improve the delivery of public services on pain of dismissal.47

In Oman, Arab Spring protests started small but early, before the fall of Mubarak.48 While the protests were clearly modeled after events in Tunisia and, later, in Egypt, protesters did not demand the overthrow of the regime: protesters consistently demanded reform rather than revolution. Later in February protests spread from Muscat to the provinces, where they became more contentious (and, it would seem, more working class, an inversion of the progress of the Tunisian protests). One protester died. But protesters still avoided calls for the fall of the regime. In the provincial city of Sohar, where protests were most serious, the demonstrators named the roundabout that they occupied "reform square."49

The outbreak of unrest in Sohar generated an immediate reaction from Sultan Qaboos. He reshuffled the cabinet and raised the stipends paid to university students; he also promised


49 Worrall, “Oman,” 100.
50,000 public sector jobs. He followed this up in early March with a further series of government changes, including the appointment of seven elected members of the Majlis al-Shura to the cabinet, replacing ministers targeted by protesters. In mid-March Qaboos fired his police chief, pleasing protesters, and announced that the national representative body would be given more formal legislative authority. This blizzard of reforms helped Qaboos ride out the Arab Spring. But the risk that the Omani protests would run out of control, barring disastrously incompetent statecraft on the part of the sultan, was small: protesters clearly wanted reform, not the "fall of the regime." The attitude of Omanis toward their regime predated the Arab Spring, and were not the creation of regime bribes in late February and early March.

Not all citizens of Saudi Arabia stayed home in the spring of 2011. Hundreds came out in the Eastern Province on the 17th of February – that is, when contagion was at its height – demanding the release of prisoners. The protesters were Shi’a, closely related to the Arab Shi’a of Bahrain who initiated their protests a few days earlier. These protests peaked a month later,


immediately following the Saudi intervention in Bahrain, when thousands of protesters took to the streets.\textsuperscript{53} The protesters, who even at the height of the Arab Spring could not avoid the naked fact that they alone, as Shi’a, could not overthrow the regime, did not include this in their demands (one sign at a protest read "we do not plan to overthrow the regime").\textsuperscript{54}

In Riyadh, the political center of the kingdom, a "Day of Rage" called for the 11\textsuperscript{th} of March – already late in the Arab Spring for an initial protest – was a "complete failure."\textsuperscript{55} The police made themselves ubiquitous in Riyadh, but that hardly makes Saudi Arabia different from other Arab regimes. The king’s promise, on the 24\textsuperscript{th} of February, to spend $37 billion U.S. on various handouts to citizens was a move that many other Arab rulers could not match, though it also came almost a month after the first Egyptian protests.\textsuperscript{56}

Protests in \textbf{Morocco} broke out in earnest somewhat later than elsewhere, on the 20\textsuperscript{th} of February. The protests, however, were very large: the government admitted 37,000 came out on the 20\textsuperscript{th}, and protesters claimed well over 200 thousand.\textsuperscript{57} As is well known, the protesters did not demand the overthrow of the monarchy, focusing their demands instead on economic grievances and demands for reform.\textsuperscript{58} The regime generally avoided serious repression, though

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{54} Matthiesen, “A "Saudi Spring?,” 636.
\textsuperscript{55} Lacroix, “Is Saudi Arabia Immune?,” 54.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} Matt Buehler, “The Threat to ‘Un-Moderate’: Moroccan Islamists and the Arab Spring,” \textit{Middle East Law and Governance}, January 2013, 12.
\textsuperscript{58} Irene Fernández Molina, “The Monarchy vs. the 20 February Movement: Who Holds the Reins of
\end{footnotesize}
five died in riots in provincial cities. On March 9th the king made a major speech in which he promised political reforms. The speech was well received – and was entirely political, with no effort to curry favor with promises of lower taxes, more jobs, and the like. But the speech, given two weeks after the initial major protests, is not what stopped the protests from exploding in the manner of the Egyptian or Libyan protests. Hosni Mubarak made much larger concessions much faster. The threat faced by Morocco's king, even before he composed a response, was nothing like that faced by the rulers of Libya or Egypt: his people, given the opportunity to demand his ouster, in a context in which it might have been achieved, demurred.

In Jordan the king moved early, cutting taxes on fuel and raising food subsidies on the 10th of January, in anticipation of a “Day of Anger” called by activists for the 14th of January. Demonstrations continued through the following months, but never grew large, at least by Arab Spring standards. The regime deployed thugs to break up protests in February and again in March, when one person died (apparently of a heart attack): the regime contained the protests without extreme brutality. As in Oman and Morocco, demands from the beginning focused on economic and political reform but not the fall of the regime. The king made a series of political

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61 Ibid., 3; Sarah A. Tobin, “Jordan’s Arab Spring: The Middle Class and Anti-Revolution,” Middle East Policy 19, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 102.

reforms to assuage protests, including sacking his prime minister on the 1st of February. Protests continued sporadically – mostly among East Bank Jordanians rather than those of Palestinian descent – and the level of alienation from the regime struck many observers. Dissent in Jordan was second only to that in Bahrain, among the monarchies. But in the end, while the Tunisian spark generated a few flashes in Jordan, few Jordanians wanted the fall of their regime.

**Syria**

Almost everywhere in the Arab world, the Tunisian model was akin to a match: dropped in some countries, it caused an immediate conflagration, while in others it fizzled out. Only in **Syria** did it smolder, then erupt. The most common explanation for how small protests developed into a catastrophic civil war focus on a repression/protest cycle encouraged by the regime as it responded with overwhelming force to small demonstrations in March. There is almost certainly some truth to these explanations: the protests developed over the course of months, not days, and the regime’s brutality during the protests became a central part of the narrative. But other factors are crucial for any explanation of the course of the Arab Spring in Syria.

The Syrian regime had many supporters in the spring of 2011. On March 29th the regime turned out a massive pro-regime demonstration, numbering in the hundreds of thousands. This was large by the standard of Arab Spring protests (for or against the regime) anywhere. Regime support was sectarian, but also urban, and this slowed the development of protests in

63 Ibid., 386.
Syria: demonstrations have more impact when they are in the capital, and especially when demonstrators occupy a central physical space. That did not happen in Syria in no small part because most urban Syrians were not enthusiastic about the “fall of the regime.” But other Syrians were, and they were mostly rural and Sunni. The regime brutally repressed protests in two provincial cities (Deraa and Banyas) in mid-March, and set off a series of further protests, mostly in rural areas or the outskirts of cities, that launched the civil war.

Without strong urban support, the Tunisian shock did not generate regime-threatening demonstrations as quickly as it did in countries where the urge to be done with the regime was felt strongly in the capital. But, having dodged the initial, exceedingly dangerous burst of diffusion, the regime had a valuable reprieve in which to head off protests. The Syrian regime, to be sure, very quickly announced a raft of economic concessions, including subsidy increases, tax cuts on necessities, and so forth. Brutal repression of protesters, however, was immediate and accompanied by regime appeals to sectarianism. While the ensuring polarization consolidated the regime’s base, many Sunnis saw little alternative to rebellion.

**Why were some Arab countries combustible, and others not?**

Why did the events in Tunisia set off conflagrations in some Arab states and not in others? Broadly speaking, two general types of explanations can be found in the literature on the Arab Spring (and also, for that matter, in the literature on the Color Revolutions): those that are primarily economic, and those that are primarily political. The most commonly offered

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67 Ibid., 8, 11.

68 Ibid., 5–6.
economic explanation is that oil rich regimes avoided contagion during the Arab Spring. The most commonly suggested political explanation is that Arab publics wanted their presidents gone much more than they wanted to get rid of their monarchs.

Table 1 shows several economic variables (some of which have appeared in works on the Color Revolutions) just before the Arab Spring. There is no clear pattern in the economic performance variables (inflation, change in GDP per capita) that would provide a compelling explanation for why some countries experienced protests while others did not. This is in keeping with earlier studies of the Color Revolutions. Major oil exporters are overrepresented in the group of countries that escaped the Arab Spring, but there are exceptions, notably Bahrain and Libya. Of the eight with little or no oil, half escaped regime-threatening protests.

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Table 1: Recent economic performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Large protests calling for fall of the regime</th>
<th>GDP per capita (annual change %)</th>
<th>GDP per capita</th>
<th>Inflation</th>
<th>Net oil exports per citizen (2009)</th>
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<td>18,334</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>8,216</td>
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<td>3.4</td>
<td>2,803</td>
<td>11.3</td>
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<td>Libya</td>
<td>.6</td>
<td>10,455</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>5,309</td>
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<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>2,746</td>
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<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>4,206</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>&lt;0</td>
</tr>
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<td>5.2</td>
<td>1,400</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>152</td>
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<tr>
<td>Significant protests without calls for the fall of the regime</td>
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<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
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<td>.1</td>
<td>4,370</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>&lt;0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2,822</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>&lt;0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>-1.1</td>
<td>25,580</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>9,351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>16,537</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>8,135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few or no protests</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>-1.5</td>
<td>41,566</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>46,328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>8,551</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>&lt;0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qatar</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>72,733</td>
<td>-2.4</td>
<td>82,226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>1,421</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>&lt;0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>-7.3</td>
<td>35,529</td>
<td>.9</td>
<td>36,307</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Apart from rentierism, most of the variables that are often cited in explaining the pattern of diffusion of the Arab Spring are political, related to regime structure and political history. Five of these warrant closer examination: the durability of the regime, regime type (viz., monarchism vs. republicanism), level of liberalization, history of major civil unrest, and identity cleavages.

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71 GDP per capita, GDP change and inflation data is from the World Bank, World Development Indicators; data is for 2010 except for GDP growth for Libya, which is 2009. Net per capita oil exports is from the World Trade Organization and is for 2009.
Regime durability. Protesters are more likely to turn out on the streets in large numbers if they think that the odds of achieving change are high. In retrospect, it is clear that some Arab leaders had a much firmer grip on power than others. Regimes with close sectarian or family ties between the head of state and the military, police and intelligence forces were loyal to the head of state even when faced with mass demonstrations. Weaker links between the military and the head of state, coupled with protests, resulted in the rapid departure of the president.\textsuperscript{72}

Despite this, it does not appear that protesters decided to take to the streets only where the prospects for success were (retrospectively) high. Protesters demanded the ouster of the president of Syria and the ruling family of Bahrain, while taking a pass on targets who might more easily have been deposed, such as the president of Algeria or even the king of Morocco. Kurt Weyland, in his comparison of the revolutions of 1848 and 2011 discussed earlier, offers an explanation: for a handful of weeks in early 2011, all Arab regimes looked vulnerable.\textsuperscript{73} Important differences between regimes were overlooked, for the moment at least.

The durability of the regime, of course, mattered a great deal later on, and largely determined the outcome of uprisings in Syria, Yemen, Egypt and Tunisia. Counterfactually if there had been protests in the dynastic monarchies of the Gulf, they still would have survived due to the resilience of their institutional structures. But this did not matter in the initial diffusion of the Arab Spring, when citizens paid little heed. If the citizens of the dynastic monarchies had wanted the fall of their regimes, they would have come out onto the streets and

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{72} For an argument along these lines see Zoltan Barany, “The Role of the Military,” Journal of Democracy 22, no. 4 (2011): 24–35.

\textsuperscript{73} Weyland, “The Arab Spring,” 920.
\end{flushleft}
Regime type. Table 2 classifies Arab countries by regime type, in three categories: monarchies, presidential republics, and other. The presidential republics are those regimes in which power centered on the presidential palace. This is not a universally recognized regime type among analysts of the Arab world, but these regimes shared enough common attributes to be grouped together as a regime type counterposed to the region's monarchies. Roger Owen, in *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life* provides an excellent account of the presidential monarchies as a regime type. These regimes generated presidents who served for life and who centralized political power in their palaces. While these were typically not entirely personalist regimes – most had elections and political parties – their politics had a profoundly personalist feel. Most considered hereditary succession.

The regimes resembled each other so much in part because processes of diffusion that are commonplace in the Arab world (as the Arab Spring itself demonstrated). Diffusion helps to explain the morphological similarities among the presidential regimes, and is perhaps clearest in the grooming of sons to succeed the presidents.


75 This was a practice that arguably diffused from the actual monarchies, and then became widespread across the republics.
Monarchies fared much better during the Arab Spring than did presidential republics. While discussions of regime type tend to emphasize the importance of monarchism there is much to recommend an equal focus on presidential republicanism. Five of the six most seriously affected regimes were presidential republics. Of the presidential republics only two – Algeria and Sudan – came through the Arab Spring without serious damage to the regime. It is not only that Arab publics were willing to put up with their monarchs in 2011: Arab publics really disliked their presidents.

**Degree of political liberalization.** The literature on mobilization often finds a "u"-shaped relationship between mobilization and the level of political freedom in a country: very liberal, and very repressive countries tend to see less anti-regime mobilization, while those in the middle see more.⁷⁶ In 1848 contagion "did not spread to states where it seemed unnecessary,

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⁷⁶ Beissinger, “Structure and Example in Modular Political Phenomena,” 270.
or where it was obviously infeasible."

**Table 3: Freedom House average of political rights and civil liberties scores, 2010.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Large protests demanding fall of the regime</th>
<th>Smaller protests, or protests not calling for fall of the regime</th>
<th>Few or no protests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lebanon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>Kuwait</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>Qatar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>UAE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>Sudan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Arab Spring does not fit this pattern. Table 3 shows Freedom House measures of democracy for the Arab regimes in 2010. Less free countries were more likely to experience major protests demanding the fall of the regime: of the five Arab countries with combined Freedom House scores of six or below, three experienced serious protests in 2011. The three most liberal countries in the region – Lebanon, Kuwait and Morocco – escaped calls for the fall of the regime. The failure of the Arab Spring to match patterns seen in other revolutionary waves owes much to the origins of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, one of the least free Arab regimes.

77 Weyland, “The Diffusion of Revolution,” 408.

78 Using the Free/Partly Free/Not Free categories, all except the top three are Not Free.

http://www.freedomhouse.org/

79 The monarchies, by and large, were a bit more liberal than the republics, while the presidential republics tended to be less liberal. The level of liberalization is plausibly, at least in some part, driven by regime type.
on the eve of the Arab Spring. Its sudden, complete failure signaled to Arab publics that even the most dictatorial of their dictators were vulnerable.

**Civil unrest.** Arab countries that had experienced civil wars – or something like it – in the relatively recent past were somewhat less likely to experience regime-threatening protests during the Arab Spring (Table 4). The relationship is stronger if we consider only the republics: Algeria and Sudan, the two presidential republics that escaped the Arab Spring, have a recent history of conflict. Yemen, of course, is the exception. While countries that have experienced recent conflict might otherwise be thought more likely to fall into conflict again, the Arab Spring originated in the decisions made by potential protesters. These citizens hesitated to take to the streets if their country had a recent history of conflict, especially if protests threatened to reignite that conflict.

Table 4: Recent History of Major Civil Unrest (republics in bold)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recent history of major civil conflict</th>
<th>Large protests demanding fall of the regime</th>
<th>Smaller protests, or protests not calling for fall of the regime</th>
<th>Few or no protests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recent history of major civil conflict</td>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>Lebanon, Sudan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No recent history of major civil conflict</td>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Kuwait, Qatar, UAE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>Oman</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Identity cleavages.** In two Arab countries – Syria and Bahrain – the regime is drawn

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80 The unrest in Bahrain in the 1990s, while serious, fell far short of the bloody violence seen in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Algeria and Sudan.
from a sectarian minority. When the regimes suddenly looked vulnerable in the spring of 2011 it is not particularly surprising that citizens took to the streets to call for the fall of these regimes. Sectarianism mattered in a second way in Saudi Arabia: when the Arab Spring arrived in the Gulf, it sparked protests initially among the closely related Arab Shi’i communities of Bahrain and the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. Given the (overblown) fears of ties between the Arab Shi’a of the Gulf and Iran, along with other sectarian tensions, there was little prospect that the Sunni Arab population of Saudi Arabia would join with the Shi’i population of the Eastern Province to seek an end to the despotism of the Al Saud. As the Arab Spring became identified in this part of the Gulf with the Shi’a, the prospects for Sunni protest dimmed.81

**Political explanations for the Arab Spring**

Both republicanism and a lack of oil wealth are correlated with demands for the fall of the regime during the Arab Spring. While regime type is arguably better related, parsing fine gradations in correlation does not help much to resolve the issue. Instead I will examine two additional types of evidence. First, I will examine the sorts of calculations that might have been made by potential protesters when deciding whether or not to join protests, and I will look for evidence that these calculations were driven by regime type or by oil wealth. Second, I will examine the outliers, the countries not well explained by one or the other variables – in this, I will draw on some of the other explanations mentioned above.

What sort of logic might have driven the decisions of a potential protester in the spring of 2011 if it were the case that regime type mattered more than oil wealth? Citizens may have

decided that monarchies (unlike republics) can be reformed.\textsuperscript{82} Elections in monarchies can be freer and fairer because the monarch himself does not pretend to claim power via elections (unlike presidents). There is a well-known path from absolutism to democracy in monarchies via the rise of the power of parties in the parliament and the transition of the government from the control of the monarchy to the control of a majority coalition in the parliament (that is to say, the achievement of parliamentarism). Citizens might also have taken a second factor into account: in the Middle East, in recent decades, the monarchies simply have a better record of rule than the republics. Moroccans can draw comparisons with Algeria and its civil war, Jordanians with Syria and Iraq, and Gulf Arabs with Iraq and Iran (or with the more distant but otherwise very comparable Libya). In this context a bias toward reform rather than revolution is not surprising. A potential protester in a presidential republic, however, might have a dim view of the virtues of presidentialism. The gradual closing off of the Egyptian political system before 2011 was a result of efforts to secure the election of Gamal Mubarak as his father’s successor, and would not have been necessary had Egypt been an actual monarchy.

There are, to be sure, rebuttals to all of this, reasons why potential protesters might have been less impressed by the virtues of monarchism. While the monarchs have promised a great deal of reform, most have delivered very little. Historical precedents of monarchs gradually giving up power, via elected parliaments, are not common in recent decades, or outside Europe. And it is hardly clear, on its merits, why citizens should find the abuses of power perpetuated by the many princes of the Al Saud more palatable than those of Hosni Mubarak’s sons.

What logic might a potential protester subscribe to if his or her decision to protest, or

stay at home, were based on oil wealth? There are many arguments concerning how oil makes authoritarianism more likely, many of which do not address the calculations of citizens deciding whether or not to take to the streets in the spring of 2011. That said, a potential protester might have preferred to sit at home, waiting for a bribe from his or her ruler. Alternately, and more plausibly, prosperity might make citizens more complacent, generating a level of satisfaction with the status quo sufficient to keep potential protesters at home.

There are rebuttals to this line of argument as well. No one much likes to think of themselves as being bought and paid for, and the Arab Spring offered an opportunity to bring an end to the transactional nature of the relationship between rulers and ruled (if that is what it was). In the (counterfactually unlikely) case that he were overthrown, Sultan Qaboos might have taken Oman's enviable political stability with him to exile, but he would have left behind Oman's oil and gas reserves. A potential protester might imagine that a new regime would better distribute the oil wealth without demanding political submission in return.

My sense is that regime type provides a more plausible theory of motivation for protesters, while a focus on oil rents overstates the role of bribery in the motivations of Arab citizens in oil rich states. But what really mattered was what potential protesters thought in the spring of 2011, and we have at least some suggestive evidence on this point. Arab citizens made it very clear (often very loudly) that wanted their monarchs to reform, and their presidents to leave: there is a palpable difference in the rhetoric of protesters in republics when compared to monarchies. We do not need to infer that the citizens of republics were unhappy with the idea of hereditary succession, or presidents-for-life: they said so quite clearly. In both Egypt and Yemen the issue of presidential longevity in power, and the possibility of hereditary succession, were at the top of the political agenda when the Tunisian shock hit. A mere two weeks before Ben Ali fled Tunisia, a leader of Ali Abdullah Saleh's political party announced that the party would seek
to remove all term limits for the president, allowing Ali Abdullah Saleh to rule for life. This triggered a "political firestorm" that primed Yemeni protesters to join the Arab Spring.\textsuperscript{83} Egypt had held rigged elections in late November and early December of 2010 that were seen as part of the preparations for the succession of Gamal Mubarak to the presidency. One former Egyptian diplomat said that "The parliamentary elections spilt the gasoline, Tunisia literature the match."\textsuperscript{84} Even in Tunisia, where Ben Ali had no son positioned to succeed him citizens feared that the regime would somehow engineer a succession that would leave a relative in power.\textsuperscript{85} The uprising in Libya suggests that its oil wealth did not blind Libyans to Gaddafi’s faults, or convince them of the possibility or prudence of reform.

In the monarchies we find a very different public discourse. Today in the Arab world – though perhaps not tomorrow – the idea of monarchical reform is ubiquitous. Most seek relatively modest goals: a share of power for an elected parliament, not the end of monarchical influence. Demands along these lines can be heard in every Arab monarchy today – and they drown out the much less prominent voices calling for the overthrow of the monarchs.\textsuperscript{86} Virtually


\textsuperscript{84} International Crisis Group, \textit{Egypt Victorious?}, 2, fn. 11.


the only direct manifestation of the Arab Spring in the UAE was a petition, sent in March 2011 to
the rulers requesting an elected legislature with complete legislative powers.87 Numerous
petitions in Saudi Arabia have demanded constitutional monarchy, including two made public
in February of 2011.88 In Kuwait the opposition has recently framed its demands in terms of
“popular government” or “elected government” – that is, a system in which the prime minister
would come from the parliament rather than be a member of the al-Sabah ruling family.

The evidence from Morocco, Oman and Jordan is even starker. Thousands of citizens
took to the streets and demanded reform, not revolution. They did this from the beginning, and
stuck to this demand, just as the citizens of the republics demanded the removal of their
presidents virtually from the beginning. In Morocco and Jordan this clearly was not because of
oil, because they countries have none. In Oman, which does have oil, it is more plausible to
suppose that citizens demanded reform rather than revolution because they thought it was in
their interests, not because they had been imperfectly bought off by their rulers.

The sharply different attitude toward hereditary rule by citizens of the republics when
compared to the citizens of the monarchies might not, in some ways, make a great deal of sense:
it is all, in the end, hereditary rule. There is more hypocrisy in the republics, to be sure, and less
potential for reform, but a rejection of hereditary rule in all its forms would be more consistent

Nikki R. Keddie, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran* (New Haven: Yale

87 Christopher M. Davidson, *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies* (London:
Hurst & Co, 2012), 220–226. The petition can be found at

88 Lacroix, “Is Saudi Arabia Immune?,” 50.
position. But that, demonstrably, is not the position that Arab citizens took in the spring of 2011: they clearly distinguished between monarchs and presidents in ways that suggest that regime type had a causal influence, via the attitudes of potential protesters, on the pattern of unrest during the Arab Spring.

What then of the outliers, the republics where protesters did not want the overthrow of the regime and the monarchy (Bahrain) where they did? Drawing on several of the other variables discussed above, we can find good reasons in these cases why the logic of supporting monarchs, and opposing presidents, did not hold.

**The republican exceptions: Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, Lebanon**

Algeria was one of two presidential republics in which major movements calling for the fall of the regime did not emerge (Sudan was the other). Existing explanations for this focus on both oil rents and Algeria’s recent political history. Of the two, the latter is much more convincing in explaining the failure of contagion in early 2011. Not only did Algeria experience major civil conflict in the 1990s, but the nature of the core demand of the Arab Spring protests (“the people want the fall of the regime”) threatened to reignite that conflict. The Algerian civil war was triggered by widespread street protests in 1988 that eventually led to elections in 1991. An Islamist party won the first round of the elections; the military stepped in, cancelled the elections, and ousted the president. A civil war ensued, which the military won. The result was a political system that featured a president who shared power with the Algerian deep state. Demands for the "fall of the regime" were understood in Tunisia and Egypt (and elsewhere) to mean the departure of the president. Algerians had already been down that road

and were not eager to travel it again. Removing Algeria’s president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, would not do away with the deep state (as Egyptians would soon discover). Attacking the deep state would risk reopening the civil war.\textsuperscript{90}

Sudan’s political history features an episode, in 1985, even more reminiscent of the Arab Spring. The military overthrew the president following massive protests in the capital. Elections followed, but the subsequent democratic interlude was not successful (one observer said the "record of what happened between 1985 and 1989 is utterly depressing.")\textsuperscript{91} The denouement was a coup led by Omar al-Bashir with the support of the Muslim Brotherhood. There was thus a sense that Sudan had already been down the road travelled by Tunisia and Egypt. It also matters that Sudanese were distracted in the spring of 2011 by the referendum on the independence of South Sudan, which split their country in two. Voters were at the polls, in a multi-day election, as Ben Ali departed Tunisia.

None of the other five presidential regimes had experienced anything similar in the past several decades.\textsuperscript{92} In Yemen, calls to overthrow the regime in 2011 did not threaten to immediately reopen the issues that led to Yemen's 1994 civil war. That war was between the north and the south, while the Arab Spring mostly set northerners against other northerners.

That the Arab Spring did not spread to the other two Arab republics is not surprising. These are not presidential republics, the regime type most disliked by protesters. Moreover

\textsuperscript{90} Zoubir and Aghrout, “Algeria’s Path to Reform,” 69.


\textsuperscript{92} The conflict between the Syrian regime and Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1980s comes closest, and perhaps explains the hesitation of many Syrians to protest against their regime.
Lebanon is among the more liberal Arab states. And it was not clear just what the "fall of the regime" would mean in Lebanon, and most possible answers involved reopening sectarian conflicts of the past. So too in Iraq was it hard to imagine how the “fall of the regime” could mean much other than a renewed civil war.

The monarchical exception: Bahrain

Bahrain is a double outlier: it experienced major protests despite the fact that it is both a monarchy and has a good deal of oil wealth. Bahrain is not among the richest rentiers in the region, but it receives a substantial amount of revenue from oil exports. The king made a very early attempt to buy off dissent (with a $2600 grant per family before protests broke out) but protesters did not want to be bought off. Instead, the clearest way in which Bahrain differs from other monarchies is political: Bahrain's ruling family, unlike the ruling families and monarchs of the other seven Arab monarchies, presides over a very deeply divided polity. The Bahraini ruling family subjugated the majority Shi'i Arab native population when it conquered the island in the eighteenth century, and its relationship with the Shi'a has had an air of domination and subordination ever since.93 The decades before 2011 were characterized by varying levels of simmering discontent, accompanied by street violence and police torture, but not an outright civil war comparable to the violence in Algeria in the 1990s. When, at the height of the enthusiasm engendered by the fall of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes, it appeared that the Shi'a might be able to rid themselves of the family that has oppressed them for over two

93 The ruling family reduced the native Shi'i Arab Baharna to something like serfdom upon conquering the island. Into the twentieth century the Shi’a suffered legally enshrined discrimination based on their sect. In recent years the ruling family has attempted to alter the demography of the country by naturalizing Sunnis; the military and police are made up almost entirely of Sunnis.
centuries, many Shi’a seized the opportunity.

The depths of the alienation of Bahrain’s Shi’a from their ruling family does not have parallels in other monarchies. The Shi’a of Saudi Arabia rose up during the Arab Spring in tandem with their counterparts in Bahrain, and with many of the same historical grievances. They, however, are a small minority located away from the capital, and the primary consequence of their early participation in the Arab Spring was that, in both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, the Arab Spring came to have a sectarian cast, one that discouraged the participation of Sunni Saudis. This is a commonly given explanation for the failure of the Arab Spring in Saudi Arabia. It also challenges the thesis that oil revenues prevented the outbreak of protests in Saudi Arabia: where there was a strongly felt political grievance, Saudis came out onto the streets by the thousands.

Some of the other monarchies suffer from various sorts of identity cleavages but none compare in severity to that between the ruling family and the Shi’a in Bahrain. Jordan is deeply divided between Jordanians of East Bank descent and those of Palestinian descent; while the monarchy has at times attempted to use the tension between the two groups to its own advantage, at other times it has sought to act as a bridge over the divide. The king’s wife is of Palestinian origin and was the subject of sharp criticism from East Bank tribal leaders at the height of the Arab Spring.94 The Arab Spring protests in Jordan were largely limited to East Bank Jordanians: those of Palestinian descent largely sat out the protests, apparently out of a lack of desire to reopen the topic of their status in Jordanian society (the lessons of the 1970 civil war may have had a role in this). With Jordanians of Palestinian descent on the sidelines, East

Bank Jordanians could express their discontent without coming into conflict with Jordanians of Palestinian descent, though at the same time this limited the practical extent of the demands that protesters could make.

The absence of Arab Spring protests in the UAE, Qatar and Kuwait is the best evidence for the thesis that oil inoculated regimes from the Arab Spring. These three states are among the world’s richest rentiers in per capita terms. In all three countries there is a lack of revolutionary fervor that seems, to an observer, to grow at least in part out of an awareness of privilege. But there are also some profound differences even among this trio of extraordinarily rich Gulf rentiers. Kuwait’s National Assembly imposes more constraints on the Kuwaiti ruling family than does any other legislature in any other Arab monarchy. Oil rents did not save the prime minister (a member of the core branch of the ruling family) from being forced from office in late 2011. Few Kuwaitis, however, want the “fall of the regime,” though many would like further limits on the power of the ruling family. In the UAE and Qatar citizens make up less than 15% of the entire population, and citizens have become a small, privileged caste.95 The "fall of the regime" in these societies threatens the collapse of the system of citizen preference.

Conclusion

The Arab Spring started with a set of snap referendums on Arab regimes. We can explain the results with a limited number of related variables, with regime type at the center. These

variables connect directly to the calculations of the crucial actors in the protests – the individual Arab citizens who decided to protest, or not to protest, in the few weeks following the fall of the Tunisian regime. Potential demonstrators favored the reform on monarchies rather than their overthrow, except in Bahrain, where the regime had earned the enmity of a majority of its citizen population. In the republics, citizens generally wanted their presidents gone – unless, as in Algeria and Sudan, they had gone down a similar road before. In Lebanon and Iraq the “fall of the regime” likely meant the rekindling of civil war, a prospect that appealed to few.

Despite the relatively favorable attitude of Arab citizens toward monarchism in the spring of 2011, the monarchs cannot rest easy. The current preference for gradual reform in the monarchies is not a permanent aspect of monarchism or a fixed aspect of Arab political culture: Yom and Gause rightly criticize the notion of some sort of affinity between Arab culture and monarchism. My argument is much more limited: in the spring of 2011 (and not three decades earlier, or necessarily a decade into the future) public opinion in the Arab world favored monarchism. Some citizens wanted the status quo, others wanted reform, but few wanted to overthrow the monarchs. That Bahrainis in fact did want to overthrow their ruling family reinforces the contingent nature of support for constitutional monarchy: monarchs can exhaust the patience of their citizens. The notable failure of most monarchs to implement serious reforms after the Arab Spring may hasten the day when a more serious opposition emerges,


97 Had citizens of the dynastic monarchies wanted to overthrow their rulers they would have faced enormous obstacles given the durable nature of these regimes: my point here is that, by and large, citizens of the monarchies did not want to overthrow their rulers in the spring of 2011.
though the disastrous consequences of the Arab Spring in several republics makes the monarchs look safe by comparison, continuing trends of the past several decades and giving the monarchs a reprieve. But it is only a reprieve: monarchs will not escape future demands for change merely by virtue of being monarchs.