Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East

Lessons from the Arab Spring

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Questions

• Why do the outcomes of the Arab Spring differ so much?
• What factors affected these outcomes?

• Why is the Middle East as a region so resistant to democratization?
The presence of conditions that fostered robust authoritarianism, specifically, the presence of an exceptionally muscular coercive apparatus.

Four factors:

• the fiscal health of the coercive apparatus;
• the maintenance of international support networks;
• the low level of institutionalization of the coercive apparatus;
• the low level of popular mobilization that could typically be assembled to confront the coercive apparatus in the name of political reform.
Authoritarianism in the Arab World

• The first two factors are crucial to determining the coercive apparatus’ **capacity to repress**.

• The last two factors, level of institutionalization and level of social mobilization, are crucial to determining the coercive apparatus’ **will to repress**.

This capacity and will to repress accounted for the region’s exceptional resistance to getting swept up in the third wave of democratization.
The Coercive Apparatus—Loyalty or Defection?

Would the military shoot the protesters or not?

• The military in Tunisia and Egypt chose not to shoot. Consequently, in both cases, the ruling autocrat had no choice but to flee.

• In Bahrain, by contrast, the military stood by the ruling monarch. It repressed civilian demonstrators brutally, and the Bahraini monarch survived.

• In Libya, the military split, some refusing to fire on civilians, others willing to shoot in defense of Muammar Gaddafi. The result was civil war.
The Coercive Apparatus—Loyalty or Defection?
Different imperatives in making decision

The institutional **interests** of the military may be broken down into at least three component parts:

- (1) maintain internal cohesion, discipline, and morale within the corps;
- (2) protect the image, prestige, and national legitimacy of the military;
- (3) secure the economic interests of the military.
Would the military shoot the protesters or not?

Are civilian challengers peaceful? Is the number of them small?

• If the crowds are conducting themselves peacefully, it is difficult for the military to justify lethal intervention on the grounds of maintaining order and security.

• If the number of civilian challengers is small, using lethal force against them is not so problematic. But if the level of social mobilization is high, then the costs of repression will be high as well.
Would the military shoot the protesters or not?

In short, **shooting on civilians is potentially costly for the military.** It can spell serious damage to the military’s core institutional interests: cohesion, discipline, prestige, and legitimacy.

Variation in defection by the military is governed in large part by two factors: **the institutional character of the military and the level of social mobilization.**
Structural character of the military

- The degree to which the military is institutionalized as opposed to being organized along patrimonial lines.
- Are the interests of the military elite linked to the longevity of the regime?
Social mobilization

Four factors were essential to setting the protest in motion:
• long-standing grievances,
• an emotional trigger,
• a sense of impunity,
• access to new social media.

*Incidence of grievance does not predict incidence of protest.
The Role of Social media

- Social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, cell phones with video feed capacity) and satellite television (al-Jazeera, al-Arabiya) together enabled the mobilization of collective action in ways that had been heretofore impossible in repressive settings.

- Both significantly escaped the control and repression of the authoritarian state—social media through its anonymity and spontaneity, satellite television through its foreign provenance.

- In addition, social media provided the means for coordinating and synchronizing thousands of people, making mass gatherings possible even in the absence of formal organizational infrastructure.
Theoretical Generalizations

The events of the Arab Spring illustrate the **power of contagion** (or, alternatively, the **power of diffusion**).

Two different logics:

(1) the logic of deliberate diffusion, carried out via the **conscious** sharing of tactics and frames by activists who are linked by networks that may be transnational;

(2) the logic of demonstration effect (that is, “the power of precedent”).
Theoretical Generalizations

• Beissinger develops the notion of “analogic thinking,” where, thanks to a sense of commonality across cases (such as shared history, shared culture, and common institutional context), people “make analogies ...and... read relevance into developments in other contexts.”

• People “learn by example,” and cases of prior success become “models for emulation”. People are motivated to take action they might never have considered before.
Theoretical Generalizations

• The pattern of social mobilization evidenced in the Arab world confirms the importance of shared culture, history, and identity to explaining key political phenomena such as protest and social mobilization.

• The importance of “regional effects” in governing phenomena like democratization.
Key points

Social mobilization + social media + power of diffusion + analogic thinking + sense of commonality => Arab Spring

Muscular coercive apparatus => capacity and will to repress. Would the military shoot the protesters or not?
• interests of the military
• institutional character of the military
• level of social mobilization
Thank you for your attention!