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The “Arab Spring” in the Kingdoms

Zoltan Barany | September 2012

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Introduction¹

The revolutions that have rocked the presidential republics of North Africa and the Middle East since early-2011 have garnered intense scholarly and journalistic interest and, in a short time, spawned an extensive literature.² The Arab world's eight monarchies – Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – with the notable exception of the first, a tiny island kingdom off the coast of Saudi Arabia, have escaped the brunt of the upheaval and received relatively modest attention. Demonstrations in these countries were generally small; protesters demanded reform not revolution, governments reacted to events with a measure of flexibility, and their security forces typically avoided disproportionate retaliation. These generalizations, however, hide a far more complex reality: the extent of the unrest and each regime's reaction to them was quite different across the eight states. The Arab Spring in the monarchies has ranged from virtually none in the UAE to large-scale and often violent protests aiming to overthrow the regime in Bahrain. Correspondingly, the gamut of state responses ran from tactical-preemptive political concessions in Qatar and a new constitution Morocco to the armed suppression of the uprising with the assistance of foreign troops in Bahrain.

Numerous scholars have sought to illuminate the differences between the Arab world's presidential republics versus its monarchies in an attempt to explain why the latter escaped the recent upheavals relatively unscathed.³ The purpose of this paper is to

¹ This analysis was written prior to the Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi's dismissal of Cairo's top two generals and his quashing of a military order that had curbed the new leader's powers.

² Some examples of this are John R. Bradley, *After the Arab Spring* (New York: Palgrave, 2012); Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring* (London: Zed Books, 2012); Nonie Darwish, *The Devil We Don't Know* (New York: Wiley, 2012); Jean-Pierre Filiu, *The Arab Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); James L. Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012); Lin Noueihed and Alex Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012); Roger Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); and Robin B. Wright, *Rock the Casbah* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011).

³ See F. Gregory Gause, III, "Monarchy, Stability, and Political Reform in the Year of the Arab Upheaval," paper read at the Rahmaniyya Conference (Al Ghat, Saudi Arabia, January 2012); Eva Bellin, "Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East," in *Comparative Politics*, 44 (2), January 2012, 127-149; Silvia Colombo, "The GCC Countries and the Arab Spring: Between Outreach, Patronage, and Repression," *Instituto Affari Internazionali*, IAI Working Papers, 12/09 (Rome, March

answer a different and thus far neglected question: what explains the disparities between the Arab kingdoms themselves? How does one account for the variation between the unrests and the state responses among the eight kingdoms? The key to this puzzle, I contend, also illuminates the reasons for the relatively moderate upheavals in all but one of the eight states, as well as for the comparative effectiveness, at least in the short term, of the ruling elites' actions to counter them. The main argument of this article is that the differing magnitude of challenges to monarchical states is explained by disparities in popular support for the regimes, deep-seated societal divisions, and the deficiencies of the opposition forces. The differences in state responses, on the other hand, stem from divergent financial resources, dissimilar political approaches, and varying levels of reliance on external diplomatic, financial, and security assistance.

The Arab monarchies have been classified in several ways based on their historical traditions, religious authority, state-building capacity, natural resource endowment, and types of coercive agencies.⁴ For the purpose of explaining political outcomes, the most useful typology distinguishes between *dynastic* and *linchpin* monarchies.⁵ In dynastic monarchies male members of the ruling families tend to dominate the top political offices, are actively involved in the daily management of state bureaucracies, and often compete with one another for influence and power. In other words, dynastic monarchies are ruled directly by royal families. In linchpin monarchies, on the other hand, the royal families' political engagement is typically limited to overseeing the country's political-strategic orientation while staying away from the nitty-gritty of everyday politics in order to maintain an above-the-fray image. The royals of linchpin monarchies rule through "commoners" heading their governments, but they do

2012); Ludger Kühnhardt, "The Resilience of Arab Monarchy," *Policy Review*, #173, June 2012; and F. Gregory Gause, III and Sean Yom, in *Journal of Democracy*, forthcoming.

⁴ See, for instance, Michael Herb, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 7-10; Mehran Kamrava, "Military Professionalization and Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East," *Political Science Quarterly*, 115(1), Spring 2000, 87-89; Ami Ayalon, "Post-Ottoman Arab Monarchies: Old Bottles, New Labels?," in Joseph Kostiner, ed., *Middle East Monarchies: The Challenge of Modernity* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000), 23-36; and Russell E. Lucas, "Monarchical Authoritarianism: Survival and Political Liberalization in a Middle Eastern Regime Type," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 36(1), February 2004, 103-119.

⁵ Lucas, *Ibid.*, 108.

concentrate executive powers in their hands, appoint key ministers including the prime minister, and direct foreign policy, internal security, and defense. The classification of dynastic (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) versus linchpin monarchies (Jordan and Morocco) also perfectly coincides with the separation between the oil-rich kingdoms of the Arabian Peninsula, on the one hand, and the resource-poor monarchies, on the other. The membership of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the regional organization of the kingdoms bordering on the Arabian Gulf, matches the group of six dynastic monarchies as well.

The analysis in this paper consists of two main parts. In the first, I briefly describe the unrest in the dynastic and linchpin monarchies, followed by a detailed examination of the key factors that explain the varying experiences of the Arab Spring in the eight kingdoms. In the second part, the focus shifts to state responses to the protests, beginning with a concise account of the regimes' reactions, exploring the reasons for the differences among them, and discussing the role of the GCC in the upheaval. In the conclusion, I address the near- and medium-term prospects of political stability in the Arab monarchies.

Varieties of Upheaval

Compared to the full-blown uprisings elsewhere in the Arab world, the dynastic kingdoms, with the notable exception of Bahrain, were barely affected by the turmoil. (All Arab monarchies, aside from Oman, are ruled by Sunni Muslim royal families. Bahrain, however, is the only Sunni Muslim kingdom with Shiite Muslim majority population.). The GCC countries experienced disturbances quite dissimilar from one another, however. In super-rich Qatar no demonstrations took place at all. A few activists criticized the emir's pro-West foreign policy, but the main domestic threat remained the longstanding in-fighting within the several thousand strong al-Thani ruling family.⁶ The UAE also remained quiet aside from a handful of intellectuals, mostly university professors and former members of the Federal National Council (FNC) who signed a petition demanding free elections to the FNC, the country's main federal authority.⁷ In Oman, opposition activists organized a number of demonstrations starting

⁶ Guido Steinberg, "Qatar and the Arab Spring," *SWP Comments* 7 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, February 2012), 7.

⁷ See Rajesh Singh, "Why Arab Spring Evades UAE," *Pioneer* (New Delhi), December 17, 2011; and Yochi J. Dreazen, "Where the Arab Spring Faltered," *National Journal*, January 26, 2012.

on January 17, 2011. At first, only 200 hundred or so people participated, mostly in the industrial port city of Sohar, but later protests spread to the capital, Muscat, and other towns. In the last few days of February, as many as 2,000 demonstrated in Sohar, setting fire to a supermarket and blocking the entrance to the harbor. Some protesters hurled stones at security forces who cordoned them off and attempted to contain and disperse them with tear-gas and rubber bullets.⁸ On March 1, the Omani Army, backed by tanks, dispersed the crowds – killing one person and injuring several others in the process. Organizers called for a “March 2 Uprising for Dignity and Freedom” on Facebook, but no more than 50 answered the call.⁹ Most protesters sought jobs, pay raises, and anti-corruption measures, with a few who called for a new constitution leading to a parliamentary monarchy.¹⁰

The Arab Spring was even more eventful in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, countries with substantial Shiite Muslim minorities. Organizers promised a “Day of Rage” in Riyadh that never took off because of the extensive pre-emptive deployment of security forces.¹¹ Nonetheless, several peaceful protests attended by hundreds of people took place in defiance of a permanent national ban on protests in the oil-rich Eastern Province, particularly in the Shiite-majority city of Qatif. The predominantly Shiite Muslim marchers, female protesters were accompanied by chaperones, called for the end of religious discrimination, the expansion of women’s rights, and the lifting of restrictions on freedom of speech on numerous occasions in the spring and fall of 2011.¹² Given that 39 percent of Saudi citizens between the ages of 20 and 24 are unemployed, it is

⁸ “Oman police clash with stone-throwing protesters,” *Reuters* (Muscat), February 27, 2011.

⁹ Angus McDowall, “Protests in Oman sputter,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 2, 2011.

¹⁰ David Sorenson, “Transitions in the Arab World: Spring or Fall?,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 5(3), Fall 2011, 24; and Marc Valeri, “Oman,” in Christopher M. Davidson, ed., *Power and Politics in the Persian Gulf Monarchies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 58.

¹¹ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Saudi Arabia,” in Davidson, ed., *Ibid.*, 86; Ian Saleh, “Saudi Arabia ‘Day of Rage’ begins quietly, markets watch protests closely,” and Michael Birnbaum, “Saudi Arabia calm on planned ‘Day of Rage,’ but protests spark violence elsewhere,” both in *Washington Post*, March 11, 2011.

¹² “Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring: Absolute monarchy holds the line,” *Guardian*, September 30, 2011; and Marina Ottaway and Marwan Muasher, “Arab Monarchies: Chance for Reform, Yet Unmet,” Carnegie Papers – Middle East (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 2011), 16. See also Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: Norton, 2006), 234-240.

not surprising that the alleviation of unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, is another common demand of demonstrators.¹³

Kuwait's Arab Spring started on February 19, 2011, when dozens of *bidun*, stateless Arabs, protested their second-class status. NGOs were instrumental in organizing numerous demonstrations to demand political reforms, including constitutional reforms, the removal of the unpopular prime minister, and the denouncement of the mismanagement of public funds and growing income inequalities. Some members of parliament sharply criticized their colleagues for allegedly being open to bribes from the royal family in return for votes on key issues.¹⁴ Opposition activities culminated in the November 17 storming and brief occupation of the National Assembly by thousands of protesters, including numerous opposition MPs until riot police managed to disperse them.¹⁵

The revolt in Bahrain was exceptional among the Arab monarchies both in terms of its magnitude and the threat it signified to the regime. The uprising began on February 13, 2011 in Manama, the capital, and immediately took on a decidedly sectarian character. At first, the overwhelmingly Shiite Muslim demonstrators converged on Pearl Roundabout though later the unrest spread throughout the city center and to the mostly Shiite neighborhoods.¹⁶ Protesters first called for a move toward constitutional monarchy and an end to anti-Shiite discrimination in employment, housing, and education. They had the state halt the practice of "political naturalization," whereby Sunni Muslim foreign workers and soldiers are hired – primarily from Jordan, Yemen, and Pakistan's Baluchistan province – and fast-tracked for citizenship in an attempt to increase the Sunni proportion of the citizenry.¹⁷

¹³ F. Gregory Gause, III, *Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East*, Council Special Report #63 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, December 2011), 5.

¹⁴ Abdullah al-Shayji, "Kuwait in midst of its own Arab Spring," *Gulf News* (Dubai), December 12, 2011.

¹⁵ Omar Hasan, "Thousands of Kuwaitis 'Storm Parliament'," *Reuters* (Kuwait City), November 16, 2011; and Aryn Baker, "Storming Kuwait's Parliament," *Time*, November 17, 2011.

¹⁶ Kenneth Katzman, "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy" (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 21 March 2011 [7-5700, 95-1013]), 5.

¹⁷ Jane Kinninmont, "Bahrain," in Davidson, ed., *op. cit.*, 60-61.

After the police's brutal pre-dawn raid of peaceful protesters on February 17 in which four of them were killed, the crisis escalated and became more radicalized, taking an increasingly anti-monarchical character, notwithstanding King Hamad's offers of dialogue and the government's release of some political prisoners. The protests continued in March and occasionally turned into violent riots with demonstrators blocking the entrance to the parliament building and blockading the city's financial district. Some of these events were quite large, with over 100,000 people (from a population totaling less than 1 million) participating.¹⁸

The suppression of the opposition forces, with the help of GCC security personnel, resulted in at least 46 dead, including some police officers. Approximately 3,000 people were arrested, 700 of whom were still behind bars at the end of 2011, and over 4,000 who lost their jobs as a result of their participation in the conflict.¹⁹ In April 2012, Bahrain held the annual Formula One Grand Prix event against the backdrop of renewed protests and violence. The demonstrations have continued, the political situation has deteriorated, and, with it, the chances of liberalization, not to mention democratization. The relatively vibrant civil society of earlier decades has been cowed into submission and media freedoms have been greatly curtailed: Press Freedom Index now ranks Bahrain among the bottom 10 countries of the world.²⁰

The first major Arab Spring-demonstration in Morocco took place on February 20, 2011, organized on Facebook by a youth group that called itself "February 20th Movement for Change". On that day, 150,000 to 200,000 Moroccans took to the streets in 53 towns and cities across the country²¹Smaller, mostly uncoordinated demonstrations continued for months, with the participants being mainly young, educated, and urban middle class

¹⁸ Katja Niethammer, "Calm and Squalls: The Small Gulf Monarchies in the Arab Spring," in Muriel Asseburg, ed., *Protest, Revolt, and Regime Change in the Arab World* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2012), 15.

¹⁹ "Arab Spring? That's the business of other countries: Interview with King Hamad of Bahrain," *Der Spiegel*, February 13, 2012, available at www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,druck-814915,00.html.

²⁰ 173rd to be exact. See Nada al-Wadi, "The War of the Words: Bahrain's Struggle over Local Coverage," *SADA Analysis on Arab Reform* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 3, 2012), henceforth: *SADA/CEIP*.

²¹ See "Ça ne fait que commencer..." (in French), *Tel Quel*, February 26-March 4, 2011, 24-25.

men and women. The mostly co-opted political parties – with the partial exception of the fringe United Socialist Party (PSU) and the banned Islamist group, Justice and Charity – did not participate, but actually advised their youth organizations to stay away. Once Justice and Charity became involved, however, the February 20th Movement started to lose momentum because many activists worried that the Islamists would hijack the demonstrations.²² Moreover, following the constitutional referendum and the expedited parliamentary elections, the Movement had seen its popularity decline, which, in turn, was the main reason that Justice and Charity withdrew its support in October 2011.

In Jordan, the demonstrators were mostly urban intellectuals, tribal-based people from the south, along with members of the moderate Islamist Action Front (IAF), the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood which is well integrated into Jordan's political landscape. The protests started as, and for the most part remained, sit-ins after the Friday prayers. Individual demonstrations remained relatively small, with the largest, on March 24-25, attracting only about 7,000 to 10,000 people – nothing like the mass rallies in Tunis or Cairo.²³ In fact, according to a Jordanian poll, 80% of respondents did not support the protests, 55% thought that they led to chaos, and 15% viewed them as unnecessary and useless.²⁴ These groups of demonstrators were complemented, in both Morocco and Jordan coincidentally, with army veterans who denounced military pension policies for several months.²⁵

The protesters in the two linchpin monarchies demanded socioeconomic programs and political reforms. Marchers carried signs asking for jobs, effective anti-poverty measures, and social justice; they also decried rising food and fuel prices. Many

²² Personal interviews with February 20th Movement leaders (Rabat and Ifrane, April 2012). See also Mohamed Daadaoui, *Moroccan Monarchy and the Islamist Challenge* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

²³ Sarah A. Tobin, "Jordan's Arab Spring: The Middle Class and Anti-Revolution," *Middle East Policy*, 19(1), Spring 2012, 101.

²⁴ Cited in Samuel Helfont and Tally Helfont, "Jordan: Between the Arab Spring and the Gulf Cooperation Council," *Orbis*, 56(1), Winter 2012, 90.

²⁵ To be sure, the reasons were different. Former prisoners-of-war of Morocco's Sahara campaign want compensation for time spent in incarceration, while Jordanian veterans demand the same pension program that newly retired officers get. Personal interviews with protesters in Rabat and Amman (April 2012).

criticized the endemic corruption in public life and condemned governments for not implementing effective anti-corruption measures. Jordan's King Abdullah II himself received plenty of criticism; he is considered by many to be far too Westernized and tolerant of the extravagant lifestyle of his Palestinian-born wife and the shady business deals of her relatives.²⁶ Although no one publicly suggested abolishing the monarchy – the fear of turmoil and chaos in Syria, Yemen, and Libya was an added deterrent against radical action – many activists in both countries appealed for sacking unpopular governments, disbanding legislatures, and new electoral laws and elections. The popular Arab call *al-shaib uridu dusturan jadid* ("the people want a new constitution") symbolized the opposition's plea for democracy and political change.²⁷ Many voiced their desire for a parliamentary monarchy in which "the king reigns but does not rule," or, as Zaki Bani Rshaid, a leader of the IAF put it, to be "like the queen of England or the president of Israel – as an umbrella for stability".²⁸

One can draw some generalizations from such disparate events if Bahrain, the exceptional case, is isolated. Namely, protesters did not call into question the kingdoms' basic political and economic arrangements. Instead, they sought political and socioeconomic reforms, such as electoral reform, freedom to establish civil society organizations, guarantees of freedom of expression, and, in some cases, changes in personnel, in particular the removal of corrupt and incompetent ministers. The demonstrations were small, peaceful, and non-confrontational, and in most cases foreign residents stayed away as they were not about to jeopardize their livelihood by political involvement. Most importantly, though, the foregoing depictions of the Arab Spring in the eight monarchies reveal tremendous variation. This surprisingly broad spectrum of unrest extends from essentially no opposition activity in Qatar and the UAE, to sporadic demonstrations in Oman, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, to sustained protests in Morocco and Jordan, to a full-fledged revolution in Bahrain. How to explain this?

²⁶ See, for instance, Helfont and Helfont, *op. cit.*, 89.

²⁷ Driss Maghraoui, "Constitutional Reforms in Morocco: Between Consensus and Subaltern Politics," *Journal of North African Studies*, 16(4), December 2011, 687.

²⁸ Ethan Bronner, "Jordan faces a rising tide of unrest, but few expect a revolt," *New York Times*, February 4, 2011.

Explaining the Different Levels of Upheaval

There are three broad reasons for the various levels of opposition activity in the Arab monarchies since early-2011: popular support for royal rule, societal cleavages, and the shortcomings of political mobilization. The relative importance of these three factors varies between states; these factors are all complex, and thus deserve scrutiny.

Popular Support for Monarchical Regimes

In its most basic form, "legitimacy" denotes the popular acceptance of authority,²⁹ a notoriously difficult concept to define let alone to operationalize, but it is important to think about in this context because fundamentally the regimes of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak, Muammar Qaddafi, and other Arab dictators fell because they were widely regarded as illegitimate by their subjects. In stark contrast, the majority of the Arab kingdoms' citizens genuinely support the monarchy as a political system.³⁰ Individual rulers, to be sure, may not be popular and many citizens object to the extent of political power their monarchs hold. Nevertheless, Arab kings continue to enjoy a relatively high degree of legitimacy, benefiting from widespread popular approval of the *institution* of the monarchy (i.e., monarchy as regime type), in every state with the sole exception of Bahrain.³¹ An independent 2009 Moroccan poll found that over 90% of the respondents approved of King Mohammed VI's rule.³² Even in Jordan, where King Abdullah II is not personally popular, the monarchy remains widely supported because

²⁹ See Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review*, 53(1), March 1959, 69-105; Thomas Nagel, "Moral Conflict and Political Legitimacy," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 16(3), Summer 1987, 215-240; M. Stephen Weatherford, "Measuring Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review*, 86(1), March 1992, 149-166; and Allen Buchanan, "Political Legitimacy and Democracy," *Ethics*, 112(4), July 2002, 689-719.

³⁰ See, for instance, George Joffe, "Morocco: Monarchy, Legitimacy, and Succession," *Third World Quarterly*, 10(1), 1988, 201-228; Mehran Kamrava, "Non-Democratic States and Political Liberalization in the Middle East," *Third World Quarterly*, 19(1), 1998, 63-85; Owen Kirby, "Want Democracy? Get a King!" *Middle East Quarterly*, 7(4), December 2000, 3-12; and personal interviews.

³¹ Ottaway and Muasher, *op. cit.*, 1.

³² James N. Sater, "Morocco's 'Arab Spring'," *Middle East Institute*, October 1, 2011, www.mei.edu/content/morocco-s-arab-spring; and "Le Peuple Juge son Roi," *Le Monde*, August 3, 2009.

it is viewed as “the thread that holds a divided country together”.³³ The dynastic monarchs of the Gulf enjoy similarly high levels of legitimacy; any attempt to unseat them would be opposed by the vast majority of their citizens.³⁴

The popular support that Arab kingdoms enjoy is surprising because they are absolute monarchies that allow little space for substantive political opposition. Arab kings hold practically unchecked political power and are not accountable to their citizens in any meaningful way. This brings about the following questions: how could states like these stay in power *and* remain popular in the twenty-first century? Where does their legitimacy come from and how does it differ across the eight cases? It is helpful to consider three distinct sources of popular support for the Arab monarchies: religious authority, prosperity, and politico-cultural benefits of monarchical rule. Since this paper explains variations between the eight monarchies, it is important to note at the outset that the region’s societies draw very differently from these three founts of legitimacy.

Religious Authority

Religion plays a central role in the conservative societies of the Arab kingdoms, and their rulers do well to imbue their status with religious significance, symbolism, and authority. The Amman-based Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre, an independent research organization that gauges the influence of the world’s Muslim leaders, ranks the Saudi, Moroccan, and Jordanian kings first, second, and fourth on its list of the “The Muslim 500: The World’s Most Influential Muslims”³⁵ (the Emir of Qatar and the Sultan of Oman, in the sixth and ninth places, respectively, are also in the top ten). The first reason mentioned for the top spot of King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Al-Saud is not his country’s oil wealth, but his position as the custodian of Islam’s two holy cities, Mecca and Medina, and the two holy mosques therein.

³³ Bronner, *op. cit.*; and personal interviews in Amman (April 2012).

³⁴ See Abdulkarim al-Dekhayel, *Kuwait: Oil, State, and Political Legitimation* (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2000), esp. 1-20; Christopher M. Davidson, *The United Arab Emirates: A Study in Survival* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2005); Timothy Niblock, *Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy, and Survival* (London: Routledge, 2006); and Naomi Sakr, ed., *Arab Media and Political Renewal: Community, Legitimacy, and Public Life* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007).

³⁵ See <http://themuslim500.com/>.

Religious standing is even more important for the kings of the two resource-poor monarchies, Morocco and Jordan. King Mohammed VI of Morocco is *Amir al-Muminin*, or Commander of the Faithful (a title that goes back to the early days of Islam).³⁶ The religious influence of King Abdullah II of Jordan is due to his lineage in the Hashemite family and his technical appointment powers, currently exercised in cooperation with the Palestinian Authority, for religious authority in the Haram al-Sharif (Temple Mount) in Jerusalem. The recognition of both Mohammed VI and Abdullah II as direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad is a major component of their religious authority.

Although no other Arab kings can match the religious authority of these three rulers, their strong association with Sunni Islam provides a solid underpinning for their legitimacy. Islam is constitutionally recognized as the state religion in their domains although, to be sure, there are significant differences. At one end of the spectrum is the Sultanate of Oman, where the state religion is Ibadism, a form of Islam distinct from Sunni and Shiite denominations.³⁷ The religious credentials of the Sultanate, however, were never emphasized and the authority of the current Sultan's father was even challenged by the Ibadite Imam of Inner Oman in the late 1950s.³⁸ There is no mention of Sharia law in the relatively liberal Moroccan constitution. Still, many Moroccans, especially the uneducated – up to 70% of the population is illiterate – believe that the blessings of God come down through the king.³⁹ At the other end of the spectrum, the Saudi king's absolute power is restrained only by the Quran and sharia whose

³⁶ See John Waterbury, *The Commander of the Faithful* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), especially 144-158.

³⁷ See John C. Wilkinson, *Ibadism: Origins and Early Development in Oman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³⁸ Dale F. Eickelman, "From Theocracy to Monarchy: Authority and Legitimacy in Inner Oman, 1935–1957," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 17(1), February 1985, 3-24; and John B. Meagher, *The Jebel Akhdar War: Oman, 1954-1959* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 1985).

³⁹ Elaine C. Hagopian, "Islam and Society-Formation in Morocco Past and Present," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 3(1), Autumn 1963, 70-80; Henry Munson, Jr., "The Social Base of Islamic Militancy in Morocco," *Middle East Journal*, 40(2), Spring 1986, 267-284; and personal interviews in Morocco.

constitutional status is guarded by the Wahhabi (or Salafist) clerics.⁴⁰ The Saudi state is fused around a single cultural and religious identity based on the royal family's co-optation of the ultra-conservative Wahhabi base and the institutionalized marginalization of the large Shiite Muslim minority.⁴¹ Naturally, for the persecuted or harassed Shiite communities in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, the religious authority of Sunni royal families and ruling elites is an irritant that only intensifies their opposition.

Prosperity

Scholars often speak of the resource curse, particularly the oil curse that increases the chances of authoritarian survival and prevents democratization.⁴² In the context of explaining popular support for the Gulf kingdoms, however, it is hard to overstate the importance of the vast fortunes they have been blessed with since the world market price of oil began to increase rapidly in the early 1970s. From the perspective of the ruling families, the massive oil deposits of the Arabian Peninsula, largely unexploited until the 1930s, have been a godsend because they enabled them not just to build up key state institutions, like the security apparatus, but also to become enormously wealthy themselves and to transfer some of the riches to their citizens.

By international standards, the citizens of GCC countries are wealthy indeed. In 2010, per capita GDP (purchasing power parity) in the Gulf states was \$179,000 in Qatar (#1 in the world), \$49,600 in the UAE (#9), \$48,900 in Kuwait (#10), \$40,300 in Bahrain (#20), \$25,600 in Oman (#53), and \$24,200 in Saudi Arabia (#54).⁴³ Moreover, their

⁴⁰ Ulrike Freitag, "Saudi Arabia: Buying Stability?," in Asseburg, ed., *op. cit.*, 23.

⁴¹ See *Denied Dignity: Systematic Discrimination and Hostility toward Saudi Shia Citizens* (New York: Human Rights Watch, September 2009); and Elham Fakhro, "The Kingdom Divided," *SADA/CEIP*, March 8, 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2012/03/08/kingdom%2Ddivided/a1ee>.

⁴² See, for instance, Alan H. Gelb, *Oil Windfalls: Blessing or Curse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Macartan Humphreys, Jeffrey D. Sachs, and Joseph E. Stiglitz, eds., *Escaping the Resource Curse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); and Michael L. Ross, *The Oil Curse: How Petroleum Wealth Shapes the Development of Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁴³ See *Index Mundi* for the economic data in this section, <http://www.indexmundi.com/g/r.aspx?t=0&v=67&l=en>.

citizens pay no income tax and many receive free housing, healthcare, and education.⁴⁴ Most of these countries, to be sure, have small populations, only a minority of which are citizens (e.g., in 2011 Qatari nationals made up approximately 15% of the population of 1.7 million, Emiratis 13% of 7.3 million, and Kuwaitis about 30% of 3.5 million).⁴⁵ The point is that the long-term affluence of citizens has effectively stifled overt political opposition in the GCC countries. This is especially so in the two wealthiest societies, Qatar and the UAE, which, as we have noted, are not afflicted by deep societal cleavages and generated virtually no political conflict in 2011 simply because rich people seldom take to the streets.

Morocco and Jordan are in a very different position. The former's economy is heavily reliant on volatile revenue sources, such as money transfers from expatriates, foreign investment, and tourism, while the latter would be hard put to financially survive without the aid it receives from the United States, the European Union, and Saudi Arabia. Living standards in these two countries are modest with per capita incomes in 2010 of only \$5,400 in Jordan (#142) and \$4,800 in Morocco (#149).⁴⁶ In relatively poor societies like these – the rural poverty of Morocco and Jordan is particularly conspicuous, regime legitimacy does not stem from people's sense of economic well-being.

Politico-Cultural Aspects

The popular support Arab monarchies enjoy stems in part from the political goods they provide. Some scholars have contended that Arab monarchies benefit from relatively high levels of legitimacy as a result of historical and cultural factors.⁴⁷ Most of the Arab world's royal dynasties have centuries-old histories even if some of the contemporary

⁴⁴ See Ugo Fasano, *Monetary Union among Member Countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council* (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, 2003), Occasional Paper #223, 47.

⁴⁵ Noueihed and Warren, *op. cit.*, 249. See also Ingo Forstenlechner and Emilie Jane Rutledge, "The GCC's 'Demographic Imbalance': Perceptions, Realities, and Policy Options," *Middle East Policy*, 18(4), Winter 2011, 25-43.

⁴⁶ Fasano, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ See, for instance, Michael C. Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977); and Daniel L. Byman and Jerrold Green, "The Enigma of Political Stability in the Persian Gulf Monarchies," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 3(3), September 1999, 20-37.

Arab kingdoms did not comprise distinct territorial units until recently.⁴⁸ The durability of these monarchies has created a sense of stability that many citizens value.⁴⁹ Jordan is the major exception: when Winston Churchill boasted that he created Jordan “with the stroke of a pen one Sunday afternoon in Cairo” in 1921, it was not just Churchillian braggadocio but something approximating the truth.⁵⁰

The relatively small populations of the Arab monarchies, aside from Morocco and Saudi Arabia (32 and 26 million, respectively),⁵¹ have allowed the maintenance of familial networks that offer channels to the royal families and encourage a sense of connectedness. Hereditary succession also enhances the stability of monarchical regimes. The successor for Qaddafi or Mubarak was a contentious issue because most citizens considered their attempts to create dynasties in presidential republics highly objectionable. In the Arab monarchies, however, royal succession is far less controversial although not without occasional tensions (as in Jordan in 1999 and Kuwait in 2006). The Saudi succession, since 2006, has been determined by the 35-member Allegiance Council, comprised exclusively of sons and grandsons of the kingdom’s founder, King Abdul-Aziz.⁵²

⁴⁸ Gelvin, *op. cit.*, 119.

⁴⁹ See, for instance, Oliver Schlumberger and André Bank, “Succession, Legitimacy, and Regime Stability in Jordan,” *Arab Studies Journal*, 9/10(2/1), Fall 2001-Spring 2002, 50-72; and May Yamani, “From Fragility to Stability: A Survival Strategy for the Saudi Monarchy,” *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 2(1), 2009, 90-105.

⁵⁰ Roger Adelson, *London and the Invention of the Middle East: Money, Power, and War, 1902-1922* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 197-208; and Karl Meyer and Shareen Blair Brysac, *Kingmakers: The Invention of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Norton, 2008), 221.

⁵¹ See www.indexmundi.com.

⁵² Moreover, Saudi law states that the king should be appointed from a list comprising the sons of grandsons of the founder King Abdul Aziz. See Nathaniel Kern and Matthew Reed, “Change and Succession in Saudi Arabia,” *Foreign Reports Bulletin*, Middle East Policy Council, November 15, 2011, www.mepc.org/articles-commentary/commentary/change-and-succession-saudi-arabia. See also Iris Glosemeyer, “Saudi Arabia: Dynamism Uncovered,” in Volker Perthes, ed., *Arab Elites: Negotiating the Politics of Change* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2004), 141-169; and “Time for old men to give way,” *Economist*, June 23, 2012.

Given scant resources to spread around, the political-cultural aspect of legitimacy is far more critical in the linchpin monarchies than in the Gulf kingdoms. The structural flexibility of absolute monarchies allows rulers to monopolize executive power or delegate authority to the government and even to the legislature as the imperatives of political survival require. Kings can withstand political challenges, effectively mediate between interest groups, and experiment with reforms.⁵³ If those reforms do not succeed, the king's above-the-fray status will permit him to distance himself from failure. Political skill, born of necessity, has been the hallmark of two resource-poor monarchies' rulers, especially the long-ruling Hassan II (1961-1999) of Morocco and Hussein (1952-1999) of Jordan. In the early-1970s, following coup attempts by military officers and a civil war, respectively, they implemented policy changes that ensured domestic political stability. In the last few years of their often turbulent rule, both rulers implemented limited reforms. Hassan II, who for decades "reigned over Morocco exactly as if he were running a medieval absolutist state,"⁵⁴ improved human rights standards and allowed partly free multiparty elections in 1997 (heavily-rigged elections were held after 1960) although they were primarily utilized to identify, control, co-opt, and corrupt the emerging political elites. Hussein legalized political parties and increased media freedoms. None of these reforms changed the distribution of political power, but they did display the responsiveness of the monarchy and contributed to their popular support.⁵⁵

Their sons, Mohammed VI and Abdullah II, ascended to their thrones in 1999 with promises of fresh approaches that their subsequent actions have not justified. They have successfully manipulated and/or controlled political institutions and ethnic communities, pledged to undertake large-scale reform programs that remain unfulfilled, and neutralized the regimes' political opponents by selective inclusion (e.g., former

⁵³ Lisa Anderson, "Absolutism and the Resilience of Monarchy in the Middle East," *Political Science Quarterly*, 106(1), Spring 1991, 1-15; and Lisa Anderson, "Dynasts and Nationalists: Why Monarchies Survive," in Kostiner, ed., *op. cit.*, 53-69; and Michael Herb, "Monarchies and the Arab Spring," unpublished paper, April 2012.

⁵⁴ Abdeslam Maghraoui, "Political Authority in Crisis: Mohamed VI's Morocco," *Middle East Research and Information Project*, #218 (Spring 2001), www.merip.org/mer/mer218/political-authority-crisis.

⁵⁵ Julia Choucair-Vizoso, "Illusive Reform: Jordan's Stubborn Stability," in Marina Ottaway and Julia Choucair-Vizoso, eds., *Beyond the Façade: Political Reform in the Arab World* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008), 55.

political prisoners get seats on human rights councils and radical feminists invited to help formulate the new family law). The most substantive part of Mohammed VI's liberalization agenda has been his human rights policy, emblemized by the Equity and Reconciliation Commission that compensated several thousand victims of human rights abuses suffered from the time of independence in 1956 until the end of Hassan II's reign.⁵⁶ Fundamentally, Mohammed VI and Abdullah II adroitly used as a ruse a mixture of superficial institutional reforms and the promotion of human rights to blunt challenges to their domination of the political system.⁵⁷

It is important to recognize, however, that some of the structural advantages of the linchpin monarchies do not benefit the dynastic kingdoms. In dynastic kingdoms, firing the cabinet means firing one's relatives and giving the legislature more power, effectively giving one's extended family less power. This is one of the fundamental political constraints of the Gulf monarchies, and, thus, one of the reasons that the popular support they receive stems more from their religious authority and ability to provide prosperity rather than political reforms and expanded representation.

In many ways the kings of the Gulf rule their country like giant households and act as if they were the owners of their domain.⁵⁸ Although, given their deep pockets, they did not *need* to establish a reformist reputation, some dynastic monarchs introduced minor political reforms prior to the Arab Spring both to serve as safety valves for dissent and to increase their popular support. Kuwait, for example, introduced one of the Arab world's strongest press freedom laws in 2006, and, especially in the last two decades, its National Assembly has become the most independent legislature among the Arab monarchical states. It is now a quasi-representative, dynamic, and occasionally raucous body, signifying, together with the country's expanding civil society, perhaps the most

⁵⁶ Personal interview with Prof. Abdelhay Moudden, a member of the Commission (Ifrane, Morocco, April 17, 2012).

⁵⁷ Anouar Boukhars, "The Lesson from Morocco and Jordan: Reform or Perish," *Middle East Institute*, September 1, 2011, www.mei.edu/content/lesson-morocco-and-jordan-reform-or-perish. See also Sean L. Yom, "Jordan: Ten More Years of Autocracy," *Journal of Democracy*, 20(4), October 2009, 151-166; and Owen, *op. cit.*, 126-134.

⁵⁸ See Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Steven Wright, "Political Change in the Arab Oil Monarchies: From Liberalization to Enfranchisement," *International Affairs*, 83(5), September 2007, 915, fn. 12; and Lisa Anderson, "Dynasts and Nationalists," *op. cit.*, 58.

promising opportunity for liberalization in the Gulf.⁵⁹ The National Assembly is permitted to “grill” cabinet ministers and, since 2009, has even included female members. As the legislature’s political authority has gradually increased, the ruling family has become somewhat more accountable to the populace.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, while Emir Sabah IV has permitted an increasing degree of independent political activity, he has retained – and has repeatedly exercised (most recently in December 2011) – the right to dissolve parliament.

Bahrain’s rulers have implemented minor political reforms for decades. When he inherited the throne in 1999, Emir Hamad (known since 2002 as King Hamad) pardoned all political activists who were exiled in the 1990s. He introduced some cautious reforms, though these reforms alleviated neither the Shiite community’s discontent nor the general population’s democratic aspirations. Most of these changes were controversial measures that failed to appease the citizenry. For instance, the Consultative Council created in 1993 actually had less authority than the 30-member National Assembly suspended in 1975; additionally, other reforms, such as those to the public administration, served the purpose of rationalization, not democratization.⁶¹ Phony “reforms,” such as these were, can actually backfire. The first major demonstration in 2011 was planned on the tenth anniversary of the National Action Charter, a shaky political agreement that resulted in some constitutional amendments and an elected parliament, but failed to provide any appreciable limitations on the royal family’s power. In a February 2012 interview, King Hamad refused criticisms of his handling of the popular revolt noting that “we started that [democratization] process 10 years ago. We were one of the first to have parliamentary elections in the Arab world.

⁵⁹ K. Salih, “Parliamentary Control of the Executive: Evaluation of the Interpellation Mechanism, Case Study Kuwait National Assembly, 1990-2004,” *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, 29, 2006, 36-69.

⁶⁰ See Paul Salem, *Kuwait: Politics in a Participatory Emirate*, Carnegie Papers #3, June 2007; and Michael Herb, “A Nation of Bureaucrats: Political Participation and Economic Diversification in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 41(3), 2009, 375-395. The Kuwaiti parliament remains a deeply conservative body: see Camilla Hall, “Kuwait approves death penalty for blasphemy,” *Financial Times*, May 3, 2012.

⁶¹ Jamil Jreisat, “The Predicament of Administrative Reform in the Arab States,” in Ali Farazmand, ed., *Administrative Reform in Developing Nations* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 163-175.

It worked.⁶² Experts concede that, prior to the Arab Spring, Bahrain's marginal liberalization, including the restoration of some parliamentary life, was impressive within the wider context of the Gulf region.⁶³

In sum, the widespread legitimacy of the eight monarchies is based on different foundations. All monarchs draw on their religious authority as a source of public support – though undoubtedly more so Saudi Arabia in Morocco than in Bahrain or the UAE – while only the dynastic kings can claim to offer economic prosperity to their people. Politico-cultural legitimacy is, again, a more differentiated source of support on which the rulers of linchpin monarchies have been able to draw more. Even though the actual results of the reforms introduced may be unimpressive, the institutional flexibility of monarchies complemented with their long dynastic histories, have allowed rulers like Mohammad VI to credibly promise gradual reforms in a way that Mubarak or Qaddafi could not.

Societal Cleavages

Sectarian and ethnic divisions are the most important societal chasms that have affected the Arab Spring; in several kingdoms, they sharply divide people and their attitudes toward state authority. In the dynastic monarchies, the critical societal split is the sectarian division among Sunni and Shiite Muslim populations. The fundamental reason that Bahrain has been such an outlier is that the al-Khalifa royal family is not supported by the Shiite majority of the country's citizenry. The power in Bahrain is concentrated in the hands of the Sunni royal family, political and business elites, and the military-security establishment. They have marginalized, at times through violent means, those of the Shiite Muslim creed, who are basically second-class citizens.

According to the 2010 census, 56 percent of Bahrain's population are foreigners, while its citizenry is composed of 60 percent Shiite and 40 percent Sunni Muslims, though

⁶² *Der Spiegel*, *op. cit.*

⁶³ Richard Common, "Administration in the Gulf: Modernization in Bahrain and Oman," *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 74(2), June 2008, 177-193. See also Mathieu Kissin, "Explaining the Failure of Political Liberalization in the Persian Gulf and Assessing the Prospects for Democratization: The Case of Bahrain," (M.Sc. Thesis, Université de Montréal, March 2008).

most sources put the Shiite proportion closer to 70 percent.⁶⁴ Many Sunnis believe that the Shiite are a potential fifth column for Iran and, if given a chance, would replace the state with a Shiite theocracy. There are large Shiite populations in Kuwait and in Saudi Arabia as well, numbering, in Saudi Arabia, 2.8-4.2 million (approximately 10-15 percent of the population, but 33 percent in the Eastern Province) while in Kuwait there are about 800,000 (30 percent).⁶⁵

Ethnic divisions have been generally less prominent but by no means absent during the course of the unrest. The aforementioned *bidun* in Kuwait and the Berbers in Morocco participated in the protests demanding the end of ethnic discrimination. In this respect, the most significant country is Jordan, where the key societal split is between Transjordanians (or East Bankers), mostly descended from local tribes who consider themselves the “true” Jordanians, and Jordanians of Palestinian origin. It is quite likely that the latter constitute the majority of Jordan’s population – credible estimates suggest as much as two-thirds – but their real number is a sensitive issue that censuses do not reveal.⁶⁶ Although the Palestinian community in Jordan dominates the country’s private business sector, it has suffered from long-standing institutionalized discrimination, particularly since 1970, when the Palestinian Liberation Organization sought to overthrow King Hussein resulting in a civil war.⁶⁷ Palestinians experience unfair treatment in public affairs, are practically shut out of the state bureaucracy, enjoy little real political representation, and are basically barred from entering the military-security establishment.

⁶⁴ Steven Cook, “Fear and Loathing in Bahrain,” Council on Foreign Relations blog, April 28, 2011, <http://blogs.cfr.org/cook/2011/04/28/fear-and-loathing-in-bahrain/>. For the 70% population figure, see Elsa Foucraut, “Consequences of the Political Deadlock in Bahrain on Reforms in the Gulf,” *NOREF Report* (Norwegian Peacebuilding Centre, April 2011), 2.

⁶⁵ Joshua Teitelbaum, “The Shiites of Saudi Arabia,” *Current Trends in Islamic Ideology*, 10, 2010, 73 (also available at www.hudson.org).

⁶⁶ For various estimates, see Mudar Zahran, “Jordan Is Palestinian,” *Middle East Quarterly*, 19(1), Winter 2012, 3.

⁶⁷ Clinton Bailey, *Jordan’s Palestinian Challenge, 1948-1983: A Political History* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1984), 49-63; and Kenneth M. Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 335-345.

In the GCC states, there is a major existential divide between foreign residents, who form a majority of the population in the UAE (87 percent), Qatar (80 percent), Kuwait (69 percent), and Bahrain (56 percent),⁶⁸ and citizens. The priority of most foreign residents, the vast majority of whom are citizens of very poor countries, is to maintain their residency status and retain their jobs. Given their reluctance to jeopardize their livelihood, it is hardly surprising that few of them participated in the protests.

Societal divisions affected opposition performance during the Arab spring very differently. In Bahrain and in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, Shiite identity was the primary motivator of opposition activism. In Jordan, however, the ethnic divide effectively limited the protests because Palestinians would not join demonstrations that, to a large extent, were directed against their own disproportionate economic power and influence on the royal palace. East Bankers, on the other hand, decried corruption and a lack of economic opportunities, but were not about to call for democratization that would effectively mean more political power for the Palestinian community.

Deficiencies of Political Mobilization

The different levels of unrest in the eight Arab monarchies are also explained by the different levels of opposition activity and the numerous shortcomings of political mobilization. In a number of countries – Oman, the UAE, Qatar, and even Saudi Arabia – there is little that could be realistically considered organized political opposition. In states where opposition forces do exist, they tend to be hampered by divisions along several axes: between those seeking incremental change and those embracing more radical demands; between moderate and extremist Islamists (the former often derided by the latter as “secularists”);⁶⁹ between activists belonging to different ethno-religious communities; and between those who campaign for human rights, economic concessions, or political reforms.

⁶⁸ For these figures, see *CIA World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>.

⁶⁹ Luke Wilcox, “Secularists and Islamists in Morocco: Prospects for Building Trust and Civil Society through Human Rights Reform,” *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 7(20), Summer 2008, 3-25.

Coordination between groups and coalition-building across ideological divides has proven to be very difficult across the region owing to inexperience and the inability to compromise.⁷⁰ Another major handicap shared by pro-democracy communities throughout the region was the dearth of charismatic leaders capable of galvanizing the opposition and bringing disparate groups together. A key reason for lacking leadership is that talented opposition leaders are often marginalized, imprisoned, or forced to live in exile by the state. With such deficient leadership, the forces for real reform had no chance against the kings, some of whom are popular, experienced, and politically savvy, and their courtiers, the political and business elites, who were not about to surrender their privileges without a fight.

To a large extent, these shortcomings may be attributed to the monarchical regimes that have impeded the development of political activism through banning, controlling, persecuting, coopting, and manipulating emerging groups and organizations. Where political parties legally exist – Morocco may be the best example – they have been mostly ineffective and/or co-opted. Similarly, legislatures have been generally powerless and/or beholden to the monarch, though the recently growing activism of the Kuwaiti parliament is an exception, and judiciaries have not been allowed to develop real independence.⁷¹ Most NGOs lack autonomy and initiation because they are wholly financed and usually heavily infiltrated by state agencies.⁷² A different aspect of this issue is that the general affluence of citizens in several Gulf states robs them of the motivation to challenge to status quo. It is hard not to notice that the two countries where there is practically no opposition activity (and no ethno-religious social split), Qatar and the UAE, also happen to be the wealthiest.

In the six GCC states, only Bahrain and Kuwait have anything resembling organized opposition. Nevertheless, even in Kuwait, political parties are not legally recognized and, as noted above, the emir has the power to dissolve parliament. A number of

⁷⁰ See Janine A. Clark, "Threats, Structures, and Resources: Cross-Ideological Coalition Building in Jordan," *Comparative Politics*, 43(1), October 2010, 101-120.

⁷¹ See, for instance, Ellen Lust-Okar and Saloua Zerhouni, eds., *Political Participation in the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2008).

⁷² Interviews with NGO leaders from Gulf states (Rabat, April 2012).

Kuwaiti NGOs have been involved in protest activities for years,⁷³ many of whom are interested in women's rights and human rights advocacy rather than democratization, though they have generally little communication, let alone collaboration, with each other.⁷⁴ In Kuwait, as well as in Saudi Arabia, the Sunni-Shiite divide is an important factor preventing the coalescing of the opposition.

In Bahrain moderate Shiite activists, represented primarily by the al-Wefaq movement, have worked for a regime shift toward a constitutional monarchy for years. They strive for free elections, constitutional amendments to expand the authority of the Council of Representatives and make it truly representative, and the dismissal of the hardline Prime Minister Shaykh Khalifa, in office since independence (1971). Following the fierce repression of the protests in March 2011, however, a growing proportion of the Shiite community transferred its support to radical opposition activists, emblemized by the "Coalition of February 14th Youth". Their principal objectives are to liberate Bahrain from Saudi occupation, overthrow the al-Khalifa regime, and let the population choose their own political and economic system.⁷⁵

Divisions in the opposition run deep in both Morocco and Jordan. The two countries share a history of regime-tolerated protests, usually occasioned by socioeconomic grievances, starting in the 1990s. In 2011, political activists were split between often radical young demonstrators, Islamists, and largely co-opted political forces – in parliamentary parties – who had no incentive to join the protests. Major disputes between incrementalists who were afraid to appear extremist, who avoided even addressing controversial issues, and those who called for rapid and sweeping reforms

⁷³ See Mary Ann Tétreault, "Political Activism in Kuwait: Reform in Fits and Starts," in Ellen Lust and Lina Khatib, eds., *Taking to the Streets: Uprisings and Activism in the Arab World* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, forthcoming), 21-23 (of draft chapter).

⁷⁴ See, for instance, Mary Ann Tétreault, "Civil Society in Kuwait: Protected Spaces and Women's Rights," *Middle East Journal*, 47(2), Spring, 1993, 275-291; Nural Abdulhadi, "The Kuwaiti NGOs," *World Bank Working Papers*, Policy Research Series, WPS #524 (Washington, DC, October 1990); and Lubna al-Kazi, "Women and Non-Governmental Organizations in Kuwait," *Human Resource Development International*, 14(2), April 2011, 167-181.

⁷⁵ Toby Jones, "Bahrain's revolutionaries speak: An exclusive interview with Bahrain's Coalition of February 14th Youth," *Jadaliyya*, March 22, 2012,

www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/4777/bahrains-revolutionaries-speak_an-exclusive-interv.

could not be resolved.⁷⁶ Ultimately, protesters could agree only on their disapproval of absolute monarchical rule.

These cleavages and shortcomings of the opposition obviously diminished their capacity to gain more significant concessions from the regimes and, conversely, contributed to the stability of Arab monarchies. It is difficult to confidently state which country's opposition forces are more divided than others. In the states where there is a reasonably well-formed political opposition, such as Jordan, Morocco, Bahrain, and Kuwait, ethno-religious differences among activists have tended to be the most decisive. Overall, the Moroccan opposition may well be the most robust in the region, leaving one to wonder what it could have achieved if differences had been bridged between the February 20th Movement, the United Socialist Party, and the Justice and Charity group.

State Responses

The enormous disparity in the financial reserves of the eight monarchies had a crucial effect on their strategies to counter the upheavals. Even though, aside from Bahrain, the protests signified only modest domestic disorder to the dynastic monarchies, their governments left nothing to chance. The most common reaction in the oil-rich Gulf kingdoms was to buy social peace through cash bonuses, lowering food prices, and creating jobs and housing. Nonetheless, some dynastic monarchs also offered political concessions, which was the dominant response in the two resource-poor linchpin monarchies. For several countries, a third factor, foreign assistance, was an additional important component of countering the challenges signified by the Arab Spring.

Buying Social Peace

Although no domestic events forced the UAE government's hand, it committed US \$1.55 billion to infrastructural improvements and made arrangements with food suppliers to keep prices low in order to pre-emptively stifle any potential turmoil. Oman is nowhere near as wealthy as the UAE, but, bolstered by a grant of US \$10 billion over ten years promised by the Saudis, Sultan Qaboos was able to mollify the protesters with major economic benefits. He increased minimum wages for private sector workers by 43

⁷⁶ Boukhars, *op. cit.*

percent, raised stipends for university students, pledged to establish a second public university, promised to create 50,000 jobs, and introduced unemployment benefits.⁷⁷ In Kuwait, every citizen received US \$3,500 in February 2011, and the emir announced that basic food items would be free for one year – ostensibly to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the country's liberation from Iraqi occupation and the 50th anniversary of its independence (the bidun community's exclusion from these programs prompted its protest). The government approved a record budget of US \$70 billion most of which was set aside for fuel subsidies and salary increases for public employees, including military personnel.⁷⁸ Bahrain's royal family initially responded with a US \$2,700 grant to every Bahraini family though this gesture did not stifle the long pent-up frustrations and energies of the demonstrators.

In terms of financial enticements, the Saudi government went even farther than its neighbors. In February 2011, it took pre-emptive action, promising to spend US \$37 billion on raising civil service salaries and building low-income housing units even before protests broke out in its troubled Eastern Province. Following the demonstrations there, Riyadh earmarked an additional US \$93 billion for various socioeconomic projects, including the creation of 60,000 government jobs.⁷⁹ Not counting its financial commitments to other Arab monarchs, the Saudi government pledged US \$130 billion to buy social peace.

The threat of expanding protests was enough of a motivation even for the poorly endowed Arab kings to loosen their purse strings. Morocco's Mohammed VI made several gestures to strategically important groups, such as trade unions, by raising the minimum wage and increasing social security and retirement benefits, and unemployed university graduates, by receiving their representatives and promising to create 4,000 jobs. In Amman, Abdullah II earmarked US \$500 million to increase public sector salaries, raise the minimum wage, and augment fuel subsidies.

⁷⁷ Ottaway and Muasher, *op. cit.*, 18.

⁷⁸ Liam Stack, "Seeking to avoid uprising, Kuwait escalates budget," *New York Times*, June 30, 2011.

⁷⁹ Neil MacFarquhar, "In Saudi Arabia, Royal Funds Buy Peace for Now," *New York Times*, June 8, 2011; and Una Galani, "Crude reasons support Saudi stocks," *Reuters* (Riyadh), March 20, 2012.

Political Responses: Carrots and Sticks

Dynastic Monarchies

The UAE and Qatar are the odd men out among the Arab monarchies. There was no political mobilization to compel their ruling elites to introduce political reforms. Nonetheless, both governments chose to do so in order to enhance their support and to anticipate the desires of the politically engaged populace. In the Emirates, the number of eligible voters expanded from 6,000 to nearly 130,000 in time for the September 2011 Federal National Council elections. The barely 28 percent turnout rate seemed to indicate, however, that citizens were “either not interested in political participation or considered the advisory body to be meaningless”.⁸⁰ Qatar’s rulers announced that in 2013 two-third of the seats of its Consultative Assembly (*Majlis as-Shura*) would be contested. Their political concessions included expanded political rights for women and a constitutional amendment that split the powers of the prime minister from those of the emir.⁸¹

Sultan Qaboos of Oman, on the other hand, was compelled to mollify protesters with concessions. He responded to the demonstrators’ demands by making several personnel changes in his government and removing corrupt ministers. Bowing to popular pressure, he also announced a number of amendments to the Basic Law. The most important of these endowed the Shura (Consultative) Council with greater legislative and regulatory powers. For instance, the Council will now be able to review the annual budget and development projects and have an increased role in deciding the successor to the throne.⁸² Additionally, members of the legislature were granted immunity to freely express their views. Kuwait’s emir reluctantly satisfied one of the key demands of the opposition when, after the November storming of the parliament building, he accepted the resignation of the much-criticized prime minister, Sheikh Nasser al-Sabah, and his cabinet. Nevertheless, the emir vowed that “Democracy in this country should not be contaminated or misused to serve questionable agendas. Kuwait

⁸⁰ Noueihed and Warren, *op. cit.*, 251.

⁸¹ Jennifer Lambert, “Political Participation and Reform in Qatar: Participation, Legitimacy, and Security,” *Middle East Policy*, 18(1), Spring 2011, 90.

⁸² Noueihed and Warren, *op. cit.*, 251; and Valeri, *op. cit.*, 135; and Ottaway and Muasher, *op. cit.*, 19.

will not be a place for preplanned sabotage."⁸³ Saudi rulers also made a few minor concessions to the protesters. King Abdullah announced that starting in 2015 women will be allowed to participate in municipal elections and will be eligible for appointments to the Shura Council, an advisory body to the king.⁸⁴ He also overturned the sentence (10 lashes) for women who participated in the women's right-to-drive campaign in Jeddah.⁸⁵

Perhaps the most surprising concession an Arab ruler made to the political opposition was King Hamad's appointment of a commission to investigate the Bahraini security forces' handling of the protests. After he lifted the state of emergency in June 2011, Hamad asked M. Cherif Bassiouni, an independent Arab-American legal expert, to head the newly created Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI). BICI's unexpectedly candid report, broadcast to the nation in November 2011, charged the regime with widespread human rights violations, using excessive force in breaking up the protests, torturing demonstrators in custody, and collectively punishing the Shiite community.⁸⁶ The king promised to consider the report's recommendations and sacked the head of Bahrain's National Security Agency, Sheikh Khalifa bin Abdullah, a member of the ruling family. King Hamad continues to insist, however, that Bahrain is a constitutional monarchy; that "we are the number one in reforms of all the Arab countries"; that he imposed martial law because "our women were very scared and it is the duty of a gentleman to protect women"; and that members of the royal family occupy most influential positions in government "because of merit".⁸⁷

The GCC states also employed the stick when necessary. The already limited rights for freedom of expression and assembly were narrowed, media laws were tightened, and

⁸³ Rick Gladstone, "Kuwait tightens security after protest in Parliament," *New York Times*, November 17, 2011.

⁸⁴ "Saudi Arabia: Women to vote, join Shura Council," *Human Rights Watch*, September 26, 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/09/26/saudi-arabia-women-vote-join-shura-council>.

⁸⁵ Kerry Dolan, "Saudi King revokes lashing punishment for woman driver," *Forbes*, September 28, 2011. See also Gause, "Saudi Arabia," *op. cit.*, 9-10.

⁸⁶ "The king's risky move," *Economist*, November 26, 2011; and Toby Jones, "We Know What Happened in Bahrain: Now What?," *SADA/CEIP*, December 1, 2011.

⁸⁷ *Der Spiegel*, *op. cit.*

the levels of political repression were raised in general.⁸⁸ Additionally, political activists, bloggers, and known opposition figures were all targeted for arrest. The Qatari government, for instance, released a new media law that prescribed punishment for journalists criticizing friendly governments.⁸⁹ In the Emirates five prominent signers of the aforementioned petition were arrested, tried, and imprisoned (though they were soon pardoned). The UAE's Federal Supreme Council was also rumored to have hired a foreign mercenary army just to make sure that it would have the required force on hand if it proved necessary.⁹⁰ Saudi Arabia imposed heavy jail terms to even the modest challenges to state authority.⁹¹ In March 2011, the founders of the Islamic Ummah Party were arrested after refusing to drop their demands for political reforms, and, eight months later, the state handed down lengthy prison sentences for 16 individuals attempting to set up a human rights organization.⁹² In Bahrain, the regime resorted to violence on February 17, 2011 to end the protests when security forces used rubber bullets and tear gas on peaceful demonstrators, many of them asleep at what had become something like a street fair, killing at least four and injuring many.⁹³ In addition to this, the aforementioned March 2011 suppression of the revolt with the assistance of GCC troops resulted in dozens of dead and hundreds of injured.

Linchpin Monarchies

There are many similarities in the Moroccan and Jordanian regimes' reactions to the protests. Not having the financial resources to purchase social peace, Mohammed VI and Abdullah II had to respond to demands for reform with tactics they have long mastered: manipulation, co-option, and minor concessions masked as major reforms. They projected willingness to compromise and carefully calibrated the actions of their coercive agencies to avoid the clumsy overreaction of some other rulers in the region.

⁸⁸ See Mehran Kamrava, "The Arab Spring and the Saudi-Led Counterrevolution," *Orbis*, 56(1), Winter 2012, 97-98.

⁸⁹ "Qatar: New Media Law," Project on Middle East Democracy, June 6, 2011, http://pomed.org/blog/2011/06/qatar-new-media-law.html/#.T95CxI7_hUQ.

⁹⁰ Kamrava, "The Arab Spring ...," *op. cit.*, 97.

⁹¹ Kamrava, "The Arab Spring ...," *op. cit.*, 97.

⁹² Fakhro, *op. cit.*

⁹³ Katzman, *op. cit.*, 5.

By and large, both states allowed peaceful demonstrations albeit under heavy police presence. When rallies threatened to become unmanageable, when the organizers were not known to the authorities, or when the location of the protests was troublesome – because, for instance, a demonstration could not be contained to a certain area or it could paralyze a business or government district – both regimes clamped down with their security forces and pro-government thugs (*baltagiya*) causing a number of casualties.⁹⁴

Mohammed VI quickly realized that the protests posed a potentially serious test to his rule and placed himself at the forefront of reform, taking the momentum away from the opposition. As a pro-reform newspaper's headline suggested, illustrated with the king's photo: "La Révolution: C'est Moi" (The Revolution: It's me).⁹⁵ Essentially, the king played Morocco's Arab Spring skillfully, staying a step ahead of, and outsmarting, the opposition at every juncture. In his now-famous March 9, 2011 speech, the king, not wanting to alienate politically moderate activists, acknowledged the validity of the protesters' demands, including their plea for a new constitution.⁹⁶ He hurriedly appointed a constitutional commission headed by one of his advisers and a panel of intermediaries between the constitution's drafters and political parties, NGOs, human rights organizations, and labor unions. Much of this was just a ploy, however, since there was no substantive consultation whatsoever.⁹⁷

On June 17, Mohammed VI introduced the new constitution and announced a national referendum on it only two weeks later. Such a tight schedule, of course, made it impossible for the opposition to seriously analyze the draft let alone to organize a public

⁹⁴ Personal confidential interviews with Moroccan and Jordanian human rights activists. See also Tobin, *op. cit.*, 101-102; and Jillian Schwedler, "Protesting Jordan: Spaces of Political Dissent," paper prepared for "The Conference on the Arab Uprisings of 2011," University of Texas (Austin, February 16, 2012).

⁹⁵ "Analyse: 'La révolution c'est moi?'" (in French), *Tel Quel*, April 13, 2011, [www.telquel-online.com/content/analyse-"la-révolution-c'est-moi"](http://www.telquel-online.com/content/analyse-).

⁹⁶ Personal interviews with Professors Jack Kalpakian and Nizar Messari (San Diego, CA, April 2-3, 2012). See also Eva Wegner, *Islamist Opposition in Authoritarian Regimes* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011).

⁹⁷ For detailed discussions, see Ottaway and Muasher, *op. cit.*, 4-5; and Driss Maghraoui, "Constitutional Reforms in Morocco: Between Consensus and Subaltern Politics," *Journal of North African Studies*, 16(4), December 2011, 679-699.

debate on it. In the meantime, the regime unleashed a major media campaign and pressed political parties, imams, and local authorities to urge people not only to vote, but to vote “yes” on the new constitution. The operation succeeded, on July 1, 2011, as 73.5 percent of eligible voters went to the polls and, apparently, 98.5 percent of them endorsed the document.⁹⁸ The new constitution has several positive elements, such as the official recognition of the Tamazight language, spoken by the Berber population. Citizens will have access to an independent constitutional court that no longer will be presided over by the minister of justice. The monarch will have to select the prime minister – now called “president of the government” – from the members of the party who won the election. Moreover, the king is no longer considered “sacred” though the “integrity of his person” is inviolable, a distinction that places no more than symbolic limitation on his power.⁹⁹

Nevertheless, the monarch remains unaccountable to any institution and there will be no legal constraints on his power. In other words, he retains the authority to fire government ministers, preside over cabinet meetings, dissolve parliament, approve or veto all legislation, and appoint ambassadors. The king still heads the armed forces and the constitutional court, and, as Commander of the Faithful, is the spiritual leader of the country’s Muslims. Royal powers were even augmented by the new basic law since the king also chairs the newly created Supreme Security Council.¹⁰⁰ Recommendations by NGOs for constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion were unheeded, apparently not to offend the Islamists.¹⁰¹ In sum, the new document offered few substantive improvements and made little difference in the fundamental nature of the absolute monarchy. This was a perfect example of top-down constitutionalization.

⁹⁸ “Morocco approves King Mohammed’s constitutional reforms,” *BBC News Africa*, July 2, 2011, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13976480.

⁹⁹ André Bank, “Jordan and Morocco: Pacification through Constitutional Reform?” in Asseburg, ed., 32. On this point, see also Ahmed Benchemsi, “Morocco: Outfoxing the Opposition,” *Journal of Democracy*, 23(1), January 2012, 61-62.

¹⁰⁰ For an eye-opening, if perhaps overly pessimistic analysis of the constitution, see Benchemsi, *Ibid.*, 57-69.

¹⁰¹ Personal confidential interview.

Jordan's Abdullah II also correctly calculated that he could take the sting out of the opposition movement by showing flexibility and promptly addressing the protesters' demands. He played to public sentiments by firing unpopular prime ministers (three in 15 months),¹⁰² detaining the corrupt former chief of the intelligence service, meeting with leaders of the influential Muslim Brotherhood, and visiting strategically important constituencies. Moreover, he formed a committee to prepare a new electoral law and to consider constitutional reforms. In June 2011, this group presented 42 mostly minor changes to the constitution. The key amendments established a constitutional court, restricted the government's power to issue temporary laws, limited extrajudicial trials, created an election oversight committee, and reduced the power of the shadowy State Security Court. Other than losing the ability to indefinitely postpone elections, no limitations were placed on the king's authority.¹⁰³ There was even less public debate on this constitutional reform than in Morocco: the parliament, loyal to the king, passed the amendments, in late September 2011.¹⁰⁴

The long-delayed and much-anticipated electoral law, ratified in June 2012, also proved to be controversial. Experts of the Muslim Brotherhood, by far the most influential opposition movement, claimed that the new law favored pro-government loyalists and announced that the Islamic Action Front, the Brotherhood's political arm, would boycott the elections scheduled for December 2012.¹⁰⁵ Civil liberties are more limited in Jordan than in Morocco and corruption pervades every facet of public life. Although the

¹⁰² See, for instance, Ranya Kadri and Ethan Bonner, "King of Jordan dismisses his Cabinet," *New York Times*, February 1, 2011; and Hani Hazaimah, "Khasawneh resigns: Tarawneh to form new gov't," *Jordan Times*, April 27-28, 2012.

¹⁰³ For analyses of the amendments, see Marwan Muasher, "Jordan's Proposed Constitutional Amendments – A First Step in the Right Direction," Carnegie Endowment Commentary, August 17, 2011; and Sean Yom, "Jordan Goes Morocco," *Foreign Policy*, August 19, 2011, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/08/19/jordan_goes_morocco.

¹⁰⁴ Ali al-Rawashdah, "Jordan Approves Constitutional Amendments," *Al Shorfa*, October 5, 2011, http://al-shorfa.com/en_GB/articles/meii/features/main/2011/10/05/feature-01.

¹⁰⁵ "Jordan Opposition Counters Electoral Law with 'Shadow Government'," *Middle East Online*, June 20, 2012, www.middle-east-online.com/ENGLISH/?id=52936; and Kristen Kao, "Jordan's Ongoing Election Law Battle," *SADA/CEIP*, July 5, 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/07/05/jordan-s-ongoing-election-law-battle/ck59>; and Hend Tarek, "Jordan opposition moves to boycott elections," *Daily News Egypt*, June 25, 2012.

government likes to talk about political liberalization, at every step one finds that even open discussion of politics is strongly discouraged.¹⁰⁶ Everyday reality in Jordan is a constant reminder that laws are worth little if they are not followed and implemented. For example, the constitutional limitations on the military-run State Security Court counted for little when it detained a journalist who criticized the unbridled corruption in the legislature in April 2012.¹⁰⁷

External Assistance

The Arab monarchies also differed greatly with regard to the foreign assistance – diplomatic, financial, and military – they received that allowed them to effectively respond to the Arab Spring. Some states like the Emirates and Qatar asked for no support while others, such as Oman and Bahrain, benefited greatly from the GCC's largesse, and though the GCC was by far the most important foreign actor for the monarchies, diplomatic support from farther away – particularly from the United States and Western Europe – also boosted the confidence of ruling elites in some of the countries. For instance, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates' visit to Bahrain, where the US Fifth Fleet is headquartered, to offer support and urge the royal family to enter a dialogue with the protesters is likely to have strengthened King Hamad's position.¹⁰⁸ Western leaders like US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and French President Nicolas Sarkozy also burnished Mohammed VI's image when they called him the region's leading light of democratization even though, as experts noted, that image was not entirely based on substance.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Two examples: Annual license fees for radio stations are US \$30,000, but if their programming includes news and politics, the permit goes up to US \$50,000. The prerequisite for employment at telecommunications companies is a "good behavior certificate" issued by the notorious and powerful General Intelligence Directorate, or *mukhabarat*, something essentially no person with even the most innocuous political activism in his or her past could acquire. Personal confidential interviews with Jordanian political activists and NGO leaders.

¹⁰⁷ Hani Hazaimah, "Groups ask for release of journalist," *Jordan Times*, April 26, 2012.

¹⁰⁸ Elisabeth Bumiller and Neil MacFarquhar, "Gates visits Bahrain amid huge protests," *New York Times*, March 11, 2011.

¹⁰⁹ "Sec. Clinton calls Morocco 'Well-Positioned to Lead' on democratic reforms," *Reuters* (Washington, DC), March 24, 2011; Alain Juppé, "Closing Speech" at the Arab World Institute (London, April 16, 2011); Robert Fisk, "Why no outcry over these torturing tyrants," *Independent*, May 14, 2011; Seumas Milne, "The 'Arab Spring' and the West: Seven lessons from history," *Guardian*, December 19, 2011; Benchemsi,

Intra-GCC Support

The GCC is the dynastic Arab monarchies' key political, economic, and security organization and a defender of their interests vis-à-vis Shiite political influences emanating from Iran. The GCC played a major role in responding to the upheaval by providing and coordinating financial and security aid to some of its members.¹¹⁰ When Bahrain's king lost his confidence in his ability to restore order, he asked for the GCC's assistance, which promptly arrived on March 14 in the shape of over 1,500 security troops from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar. The GCC contingent secured strategic locations and buildings while domestic forces brutally suppressed resistance. The GCC asked Kuwait to send troops as well but the request was controversial because it pitted Sunni and Shiite members of parliament against one another. In the end, the Kuwaiti government offered mediators and a naval contingent on a few ships.¹¹¹ The Council also promised a US \$20 billion aid package to Bahrain and Oman, two of the less wealthy member states, to finance development projects to alleviate social discontent.

The turmoil in Bahrain has also been viewed as a proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran.¹¹² First, the Saudi state has a tremendous influence on Bahrain, which is only accessible on land from Saudi Arabia through the 15-mile long King Fahd Causeway. Second, the Saudis are understandably worried about the effect of Bahrain's Shiite uprising on their own Shiite minority in their Eastern Province, where, incidentally, the bulk of the country's oil deposits are located. Third, Shiite majority Iran, the Sunni monarchies' arch-enemy, has not only been keenly interested in the fate of its religious brethren in Bahrain, but Iranian officials have claimed Bahrain as Iran's province in

op. cit., 57; and Ellen Lust, "Morocco elections aren't a model for the Arab Spring as West claims," *Christian Science Monitor*, November 28, 2011.

¹¹⁰ On the GCC countries' foreign relations and intra-GCC dynamics, see F. Gregory Gause, III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Matteo Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

¹¹¹ David Roberts, "Kuwait," in Davidson, *ed.*, *op. cit.*, 11.

¹¹² See, for instance, Margaret Coker and Farnaz Fassihi, "Iran, Saudi Arabia tensions spur fears of a proxy war," *Wall Street Journal*, March 17, 2011; Michael Slackman, "The proxy battle in Bahrain," *New York Times*, March 19, 2011; and, more broadly, Curtis Ryan, "The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria," *Middle East Report*, 42(262), Spring 2012, www.merip.org/mer/mer262/new-arab-cold-war-struggle-syria.

public statements.¹¹³ At the May 2012 Riyadh meeting of the GCC, the potential union of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain was one of the main topics of discussion. Such a merger would allow the Saudis to block potential compromises between the Manama regime and its Shiite majority, change the sectarian balance, thereby rendering the Bahraini Shiite a minority in the unified state, and allow Riyadh to station their troops permanently in Bahrain.¹¹⁴

For both Saudi Arabia and Qatar – the former acting as the self-perceived regional hegemon, the latter as the richest member eager to expand its political influence – the unrest in the region has been an opportunity to increase their clout within the GCC and in the Arab world, although in distinct ways. Saudi Arabia, sharply critical of US policy that evolved to support the revolutions, threatened to bankroll the Mubarak administration if Washington withdrew its support, and, once the regime in Cairo fell, offered financial aid to the military-led transitional authority, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces.¹¹⁵ The first plan for regime transition in Yemen was also put together in Riyadh.¹¹⁶ Qatar, on the other hand, took an independent role in shaping the international response to the civil war in Syria and Yemen, urged the Arab League to support the United Nations-sanctioned action against Qaddafi's crumbling regime in Libya, and committed its own F-16 aircraft to the NATO-led bombing campaign.¹¹⁷

The GCC'S Membership Offer and Its Withdrawal

¹¹³See, for instance, "GCC protests at Iranian cleric's 'false' Bahrain claims," Agence France-Presse (Riyadh), July 19, 2011; and "Iran-Bahrain Tensions Escalating," Middle East Online, May 18, 2012, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=52323>.

¹¹⁴ Nima Khorrami Assl, "The Kingdoms United?," *SADA/CEIP*, May 22, 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/05/22/kingdoms-united/b4pk>. See also, "Saudi Arabia 'To Announce Union with Bahrain'," *Al Akhbar*, May 13, 2012; and "Gulf considers Bahrain and Saudi Arabia union," *Telegraph*, May 14, 2012.

¹¹⁵ Kamrava, "The Arab Spring," *op. cit.*, 98-99.

¹¹⁶ Ginny Hill and Gerd Nonneman, "Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States: Elite Politics, Street Protests, and Regional Diplomacy," Briefing Paper MENAP BP 2011/1 (London: Chatham House, May 2011).

¹¹⁷ Steinberg, *op. cit.*, 1; and personal interviews with Arab League officials (Tunis, December 3, 2011) and with Elsadig Elfaqih, Secretary General of the Arab Thought Forum (Amman, April 26, 2012).

The Gulf Cooperation Council's May 2011 invitation to Jordan and Morocco to membership, and consequent withdrawal of that invitation seven months later, was an intriguing sideshow to the Arab Spring. The main proponent of the invitation was the Saudi government: being the benefactor to Jordan and Morocco would be part of Riyadh's more assertive foreign policy and a manifestation of its growing clout within the GCC. From the GCC's perspective, there were several arguments in favor of extending membership to the two monarchies outside of the Gulf. First, at the time of the invitation, GCC members were worried that the on-going demonstrations in Jordan and Morocco might turn into major revolts that could endanger their domestic stability. Offering membership would not only be a show of solidarity, but would also create avenues for political, economic, and perhaps even security assistance. Second, the two new members would bring all Sunni Arab kingdoms under one institutional umbrella and create a larger voting bloc in international organizations. Third, members of the GCC – again, Saudi Arabia was the lead advocate – have sought to establish a more cohesive and politically reliable alternative to the Arab League, a "Monarchical Bloc of Tranquility" of sorts, among Arab countries and in the Muslim world.

The symbolic value of "we're-all-in-one-group" aside, the question of exactly what tangible contributions the two states would bring to the GCC's communal table continued to linger. The most often heard response was that with their professional and experienced military-security establishments and large veteran communities, Morocco and Jordan could supply the GCC countries with qualified officers and troops to both help put down potential domestic disturbances and train military personnel.¹¹⁸ Nonetheless, the logistics of transporting Moroccan soldiers to the Gulf – Rabat is closer to Halifax than to Riyadh – made this a somewhat impractical idea although Hassan II did manage to send a division to Saudi Arabia during the 1990-1991 Gulf War.

The official response of the two invitees was positive, but decidedly guarded since both Amman and Rabat are recipients of significant Saudi investment and financial support that they did not want to put at risk. Jordanian officials were apparently surprised to receive an invitation because Amman applied for GCC membership in the 1980s but was rebuffed.¹¹⁹ Opposition activists in both Jordan and Morocco were not keen on the idea

¹¹⁸ Personal interviews with Professors Abdelhay Moudden (Ifrane, April 17, 2012) and Mohammed Al Masalha (Amman, April 25, 2012).

¹¹⁹ Personal interview with Musa Shteiwi.

of joining such a politically conservative organization, assuming that their countries would have to compensate for the monetary advantages of GCC membership with curtailing their political reform processes.¹²⁰ Nonetheless, ordinary Jordanians – 95 percent of the respondents to one survey – embraced the prospect of GCC membership as did many prominent politicians because they were more interested in its potential economic impact than its likely inhibitive effect on political liberalization.¹²¹ Morocco was less eager to pursue GCC membership for a number of reasons, and has gone much farther in liberalizing its polity than Jordan. From a foreign policy perspective, Rabat is more interested in resuscitating the Arab Maghreb Union, an inactive trade and economic agreement dating from 1989 that never really took off owing to the conflict between Morocco and Algeria over the issue of the Western Sahara.¹²²

In December 2011, however, the GCC withdrew its invitation to Jordan and Morocco; there are at least two potential explanations for this decision. First, there was not enough consultation and certainly no consensus among members about the expansion of the Council. In fact, some members were clearly opposed. Qatar, with its growing wealth and clout, has looked askance at Saudi attempts to dominate the GCC's agenda. Kuwaitis were also unenthusiastic about Jordan's membership as they have yet to forget that Jordanians of Palestinian origin supported Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of their country.¹²³ Second, the invitation went out at the height of the upheaval, but by the end of the year GCC members realized that Morocco and Jordan had weathered the Arab Spring with much less difficulty than they anticipated. Once tensions dissipated, the idea of their GCC membership did not seem so appealing any more.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Personal interview with democracy activists (Tunis, December 2011).

¹²¹ Helfont and Helfont, *op. cit.*, 91; and personal confidential interviews with parliamentarians (Amman, April 2012).

¹²² Abdelkader Abderrahmane, "Hope for Reviving the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA)," *Institute for Security Studies* (Pretoria), February 8, 2012, www.iss.co.za/iss_today.php?ID=1425.

¹²³ Personal interview with Ambassador Hasan Abu-Nimah (Amman, April 24, 2012).

¹²⁴ Personal interview with Professor Musa Shteivi (Amman, April 22, 2012)

Conclusion

The Arab monarchies experienced a broad range of unrest that elicited a correspondingly wide range of reactions from them. The different levels of these upheavals are largely explained by different kinds of popular support for the monarchical regimes, societal cleavages, and politico-cultural aspects. The kingdoms' responses to these challenges, in turn, depended on their financial possibilities, political approaches, and, in some cases, their reliance on foreign aid. On a most fundamental level – allowing for Bahrain as the exception – the Gulf monarchies were able to purchase social peace while the two kingdoms farther afield, absent the requisite monetary resources, were compelled to make some political compromises.

Although in several dynastic monarchies the Arab Spring has reached its conclusion, elsewhere calm has not been completely restored. Political activism, with different degrees of intensity to be sure, continues in Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, and Morocco. These are also the four countries where opposition activity already has some tradition. What should we expect in the coming years? Will Arab monarchs continue to resist political reforms or will they accommodate some devolution of their authority to representative institutions? Making generalizations about the Arab kingdoms, as this research has underscored, is always difficult and usually imprudent. Still, it is possible to venture some educated guesses regarding the future prospects of these absolute monarchies.

The royal families of the Arabian Peninsula will continue to enjoy an enviable economic situation at least in the near-to-medium term because, after all, they sit on approximately 46 percent of the world's proven oil and natural gas reserves and, more crucially, have a production-to-reserve ratio of around 90 years.¹²⁵ As for their ability to maintain their absolutist rule with modest changes, the rulers of the Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Oman, can be quite confident. The first two are clearly in the best position: extremely rich with a small and relatively homogenous population that has thus far evidenced no taste for political activism. Saudi Arabia is less wealthy and not free of fiscal constraints, but has huge financial reserves, a resolute political leadership not easily given to compromise, and a fiercely loyal and professional military-security

¹²⁵ Legrenzi, *op. cit.*, 69.

establishment.¹²⁶ Its most problematic potential opposition, the Shiite minority, is proportionately small and poorly organized. Oman may well face future economic difficulties, but, at least in the short term, it can count on the GCC's financial assistance. Its ruler displayed some willingness to make political concession in 2011, and its potential opposition forces have yet to show a capacity for concerted action.

Kuwait's emir is more likely to encounter challenges to his absolutist rule in the foreseeable future. Political activism, both in the legislature and in the NGO sector, has been increasingly dynamic and may be expected to continue to press for additional political rights and for more genuine representation. Bahrain's king is in the most difficult position among dynastic monarchs for the progressively more determined Shiite majority is unlikely to be satisfied with superficial measures. His options essentially come down to stepped-up and sustained repression or the introduction of substantial political reforms that will inevitably result in a diminution of his power.

The monarchs in Rabat and Amman are also locked into what Samuel Huntington called the "king's dilemma".¹²⁷ They must introduce meaningful reforms expeditiously to prevent more dangerous socio-political upheavals in the future, yet that reform process might lead to the collapse of their regimes. Mohammed VI and Abdullah II are in a particularly tight spot because the purchasing-social-peace option is well beyond their capabilities. The sixty-four thousand dollar question is just how long their rule can be sustained without implementing major political, economic, and social reforms. The monarchy as an institution enjoys wide public support in both countries but that legitimacy is not going to last indefinitely. It needs to be complemented and enriched with real reforms that would grant citizens a stake in the long-term survival of these monarchies. Assuming that the opposition becomes more organized and keeps the pressure up, the best strategy for the kings of Morocco and Jordan would be the slow but steady, gradual, and controlled devolution of their absolute power leading to a constitutional monarchy in the next 15 to 20 years.

¹²⁶ Gause, "Saudi Arabia," *op. cit.*, 6-7.

¹²⁷ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), 177-191.