The Arab Spring Gathers Clouds: Why the Revolts for Change Have Stalled

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ABSTRACT

The wave of popular protests engulfing the Arab Middle East has yielded markedly different results. While the revolts in Egypt and Tunisia prompted meaningful, and immediate, political change, the regimes of Syria, Bahrain, Libya and Yemen are able to put up a fight. The violent stalemates in the latter countries may eventually give way to political reform, but for now the fate of their popular uprisings is anything but certain. What explains this outcome divergence between the two sets of nations? What makes one autocratic Arab regime stronger than another? What roles do societies and militaries play in shaping the future of the Arab Spring? This article suggests that authoritarian regimes with established networks of social patronage and unwavering military loyalty are better able to withstand calls for change.

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Not all Arab revolts are created equal. Although there are many factors that unite the socio-political experience of the Arab people, such as a common language, a comparatively homogenous culture, a shared history, similarly dysfunctional political systems, a majority religion, an inverted population pyramid, uncompetitive rent-based economies, etc, the pace of revolutionary progress across the Arab world has been uneven. While peaceful popular demands for change in Egypt and Tunisia have forced out two of the most entrenched Middle Eastern autocracies in 18 and 28 days respectively, similar protests in Bahrain, Libya, Syria, and Yemen appear to drag on without a clear end in sight. Even worse, what started as peaceful protests in these countries is morphing or has already morphed into *violent stalemates*.

What explains these disparities in both form and outcome? Why could not the people of Bahrain or Syria maintain a sit-in in a

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public square *à là* Tahrir? Why could not the people of Libya or Yemen peacefully march on the presidential or monarchical palaces of their rulers? Is there something unique about Egypt and Tunisia? The answer to the latter question is affirmative. Unlike other Arab countries, Egypt and Tunisia enjoyed two crucial factors that enabled the popular uprisings to effect political change. In particular, the populations of Egypt and Tunisia were *united* in their quest to purge their countries from the ruling authoritarian regimes. Furthermore, their militaries' *doctrine* is one of national defense, rather than regime security, and their respective armies' *composition* is made up of all sectors of society.

The prevailing conventional wisdom inside the beltway lists four main reasons for the failure of the Arab Spring to fully or non-violently blossom outside of Cairo and Tunis. First, Mubarak and Ben Ali look like Gandhi compared to the likes of Bashar al-Assad and Mu'ammar Qaddafi. The Egyptian and Tunisian regimes were not as brutal as the rest of the despotic Arab regimes, which allowed their publics to maintain the peacefulness of their revolutions. Second, some argue the Egyptian and Tunisian societies were homogenous, devoid of the primordial cleavages that have torn the fabric of other countries. One needs only to look at the tribalism of Libya and Yemen and the sectarianism of Bahrain and Syria to understand the absence of domestic consensus within these states.

Third, Saudi Arabia is assumed, rightly or wrongly, to be playing a spoiler role in the budding democratic transformations in the Middle East. Riyadh, after all, props up al-Khalifa's dynasty in Manama both financially and militarily, cozies up to al-Assad at a time of international isolation, and seeks a limited transition of power in Sana'a. Finally, some critics of the Obama administration blame the continuing failure of the protests in Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen on Washington's "silence and lack of leadership."[1] The United States is believed to have failed to build strenuous external pressure on these regimes to give up power.

To be sure, some of these arguments have merits, but they seem to explain certain cases rather than the overall trend of violent stalemates. While it is hard to compete with the Qaddafi regime on the brutality scale, as his forces deployed anti-aircraft missiles against peaceful protesters, and bombarded civilian centers through land, air and sea, one should bear in mind that the Egyptian police fired

indiscriminate shots at crowds, and used sniper fire and armored police trucks to kill about 1,000 Egyptians; most of the casualties in Egypt died in two days only (January 28th and February 4th).[2] With torture, sometimes lethal, a standard operating procedure of the Egyptian and Tunisian police forces, it is difficult to argue that these regimes lacked the nerve or the means to kill protesters. Similarly, Yemen and Bahrain, two countries where revolts were repressed, have fewer casualties than Egypt.

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Second, even though the Tunisian society is overwhelmingly Arab Sunni, the Egyptian society is far from being monolithic. Ten percent of the Egyptian population is Coptic Christian, and there are significant strains in the relationship between urban dwellers and the Bedouins of Sinai and the Nubians of Upper Egypt, where ethnic and tribal cleavages are conspicuous. Furthermore, in both Egypt and Tunisia, there are stark socio-economic differences between city residents and those living in the countryside. Syria's Sunnis are divided on their hostility to the regime, with urban higher and upper-middle class Sunnis choosing so far to either side with the regime or refrain from political participation. Ethnic, tribal or sectarian differences are not in and of themselves an obstacle to revolutionary success.

Third, whilst it is true that the entry of Saudi Arabian troops was central to the suppression of protests in neighboring Bahrain, the Saudi role tends to be exaggerated in Syria and Yemen, and is in fact pro-change in Libya. Al-Assad's pro-Iran Ba'athist regime, historically hostile to conservative pro-U.S. Riyadh, does not depend on Saudi funds or arms to survive the uprising. Contrarily, there are reports surfacing of Iranian militiamen targeting protests in Northern Syria. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia has embarrassingly failed so far to engineer either a transfer of power or help President Saleh end the swelling protests. In Egypt, Saudi Arabia tried to save Mubarak by promising to substitute U.S. aid, if it was to be cut, and by pressuring Washington to cease its pressure on Mr. Mubarak to begin an "orderly transfer of power."[3]

Finally, while the Obama administration is accused of not being loud or persistent in its demands for democratic change in Syria, Bahrain or Yemen, the same charge was leveled during the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. Additionally, Washington has moved to wage a military campaign against Tripoli and impose

sanctions on Damascus, yet neither action was taken to aid the successful revolutions of Tunis and Cairo. The criticisms against President Obama in this respect appear to be more politically-motivated than factually-grounded.

In short, the explanations offered so far for the violent stalemates in some Arab countries are inadequate in providing a comprehensive explanation of the success of some revolts and the stalling of others.

The Foundations of a Rigorous Authoritarianism

There are two major dissimilarities between Egypt and Tunisia, on the one hand, and the rest of the states in question. These differences play a critical role in determining the state and societal response to the protests, as well as the prospects for revolutionary success or violent stalemates. They are the:

1) Degree of *national consensus*;
2) *Composition and security role* of the military.

Whether an Arab regime survives a popular revolt, at least temporarily, depends primarily then on the size of its patronage network and the military's domestic security role (or lack thereof). First, a regime could manipulate the social and economic divisions within a state to create a constituency large enough with a stake in the preservation of the governing elite, despite the lack of political freedoms. In other words, a regime may forge structures of socio-economic dependencies, where a sizable sector of the population comes to rely on the ruling regime for the provision of economic benefits and maintenance of pseudo-monopolistic privileges. This class may either belong to the ethnic, sectarian or tribal affiliation of the regime, as is the case in Yemen, Libya, and Bahrain, or may cut across social affiliations, as is the case in Syria. The beneficiaries from the rule of Mubarak and Ben Ali were limited to the close circles of family, friends, and associates as well as the higher echelons of the police force. The narrowness of their base created a situation where the populaces of both Egypt and Tunisia were overwhelmingly supportive of revolutionary change.

In Bahrain, conversely, almost 30% of the populations who are Sunni were vehemently opposed to the protests. Political change and a more even distribution of national wealth and economic opportunity threatened to jeopardize the preferential status of the ruling Sunni minority. It was thus perceived as an assault on the Sunnis' historic economic and political gains. In Syria, the Alawites, at about 10% of the population, were able to expand their constituency to include non-Muslim minorities, as well as affluent Sunni merchants in the country's two biggest cit-

ies, Damascus and Aleppo. We see this type of societal fragmentation prevalent in the tribal, regional and familial politics of Libya and Yemen as well. In all of these cases, there are sizable segments of the population who equate political reform with the potential loss of political and economic privileges. This is precisely the reason why the cities of Bani Waleed, Sirte and Sabha have remained loyal and willing to bear arms on behalf of Qaddafi, even after Tripoli, and the rest of Libya, had fallen to the rebels. This is also why President Saleh of Yemen, prior to his injury, was able to mobilize hundreds of thousands of loyalists for his weekly Friday address.

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The ability of a regime to cement a patronage network that is large enough to preclude national consensus on the cause for change is key to the prospects of a revolt to succeed. To be sure, ethnic or sectarian cleavages do not automatically result in the absence of a national consensus, as many argue. With around 10% Coptic population, Egypt is not exactly religiously homogenous. Yet, there was a palpable degree of social unison in the quest to topple the Mubarak regime. In the case of Yemen, the differences are prominent within tribes as well as across them. The youth of Yemen are equally discontent with their tribal leaders who have been on President Saleh's payroll.

Second, a military's composition and doctrine plays a major role in determining the outcome of these revolts. As long as the military is composed of all sectors of the populations, and perceives its mission to be securing the territorial integrity and independence of the nation-state, the odds are rather small that it would partake in the oppression of the peaceful popular protests. In this context, a military has a mandate for defending the nation against external threats rather than domestic opposition. In contrast, if one of the military's missions is to safeguard the regime against domestic threats, and if its command structure is heavily skewed towards a particular ethnic, sectarian or tribal group, it becomes very probable that the military would crackdown on the protesters, irrespective of their grievances or demands.

In Egypt and Tunisia, the armies are meritocratic national institutions with conscription required for all young Egyptians and Tunisians. Although both Ben Ali and Mubarak showered the higher echelons of the military with benefits to

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ensure their loyalty, the military's orientation and composition prevented it from becoming a tool for suppressing the population. The set-up of the military is instrumental to its willingness to defend the ruling regimes. Some militaries' generals, brigadiers and colonels disproportionately come from a ruling ethnic or sectarian group (Alawites in Syria and Sunnis in Bahrain), or even from a privileged tribe (Qaddadfa in Libya) or family (the Salehs in Yemen). It is even common that lower-ranking officers from the ruling group enjoy more authority and prerogatives than senior officers from other tribes, sects or ethnicities. A military with such an insular structure is much less opposed to acting violently against protesters who imperil the continuity of the political order. The overwhelming majority of senior Syrian officers are Alawite in a predominantly Sunni country. In Bahrain, they are Sunni in a majority Shiite country. In Libya, many belong to the Qaddadfa, Touareg, and Warfallah tribes, and some are outright mercenaries. In Yemen, the well-equipped Republican Guard is headed by President Saleh's own son.

On the other hand, militaries whose rank-and-file come from across different sectors of society, and where sub-state identities and affiliations play a minimal role in rankings and promotions, are relatively reluctant to view their own populations as their enemies. Not only were army officers and soldiers embraced by protesters in Tunisia and Egypt, but also the commanders eventually asked the president to leave power.

Unlike their Syrian or Libyan counterparts, the Egyptian and Tunisian militaries are professional institutions with an established doctrine of fighting external enemies. Cairo and Tunis overwhelmingly relied on the police force to carry out the repression of domestic opponents. Syria's and Libya's armed forces, however, were traditionally asked to undertake military action against threats to the regime. In many ways, regime security, rather than national security, became one of the paramount missions of these militaries.

Political revolts can only be sweeping if they do not cause either society or the military to split apart, or pit either against each other. The presence of national consensus and professional, inclusive militaries in Egypt and Tunisia paved the way for speedy and thorough political change. That much cannot be said of the other Arab societies and armies, which are faced with revolts demanding change.

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The Case of Egypt

In Egypt, despite the military's historical association with the ruling regime, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) has chosen to side with the protesters. This should not have come as a surprise given that the Egyptian army is an inclusive, meritocratic and national institution. Additionally, Mubarak's regime downplayed the importance of securing a loyal societal constituency relying instead on the police force for coercion. Bahrain and Syria, on the other hand, demonstrate the utility of having co-opted a social base and a military whose mission is to secure the regime and whose composition ensures its acquiescence. The Egyptian case is discussed more extensively than the other two, given the success of the revolution there.

From 1952 until 1967, Egypt was ruled by a military junta, the Revolutionary Command Council, which sought to create a single-party, quasi-socialist state based on the ideology of pan-Arabism, or Arab-nationalism. Following Israel's invasion of Egypt in the Six Days War, almost all executive authorities fell into the hands of President Gamal Abdul Nasser. Although President Sadat embarked on

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a political opening in 1979 to coincide with his peace treaty with Israel, most powers remained firmly in the hands of the president who had the authority to appoint governments, dismiss parliaments at will, and appoint officials to oversee the judiciary, state media and even the Muslim religious institution of al-Azhar. While Nasser appealed to Egyptians' desire for national sovereignty and social justice, president Sadat based his legitimacy on Egypt's military victory over Israel in 1973.

When President Mubarak assumed power in 1981 after the assassination of his predecessor, it appeared initially that he would continue opening up the political system. Instead, political reform in Egypt stagnated. Opposition political parties, though sometimes allowed to exist, remained shackled by restrictions on political discourse and activities. Yet, what was remarkable about Mubarak's style of governance was his disinterest in basing his claim to power on a democratic system, an ideology like pan-Arabism, or a national achievement. He even did away with Nasser's social contract with Egyptians for guaranteed government employment.

The Social Base

Mubarak's reign was characterized by remarkably little domestic legitimacy, despite the war-hero status he briefly enjoyed at the outset of his presidency. The former president's obstinate pursuit of regime-serving economic policies and heavy-handed treatment of political problems alienated large sectors of Egyptians.

Since the military coup of the young "Free Officers" in 1952, many Egyptians were willing to part with their political freedoms, and came to support their rulers for their steadfast struggle against colonialism in the Arab world, opposition to Israel's territorial expansionism, and embrace of nationalist-socialist economic laws. These hallmarks of the 1950s and 1960s Egyptian politics began to unravel with Sadat's unilateral peace treaty with Israel, as a result of which Egypt was temporarily expelled from the League of Arab States, and his economic "open door" policy that encouraged free trade and a diminished state role in the economy. Mubarak continued these unpopular policies with vigor, as he strengthened Egypt's relationship with Israel, despite the tragic developments in Gaza and Lebanon. He also embarked on an ambitious large-scale privatization program that undermined the foundations of Egypt's state-led economy, and exacerbated unemploy-

ment amongst Egypt's rapidly growing population. Even more ominously, the last six years of his rule were marred with numerous allegations of corruption and mismanagement of state resources.

In addition to pursuing these unpopular policies, Mubarak's regime did not attempt to appeal to any significant segment of the population, except for the rich businessmen or employment-seeking youth willing to join the National Democratic Party (NDP). In essence, the regime had no religious, populist, ideological or any other popular claim to power. Consequently, state authority came to be openly challenged by many Egyptian social groups. For example, Coptic Christians grew dissatisfied with the restrictions the former regime imposed on their right to build places of worship. Christians should have been natural allies of the regime, which drummed up fears of Islamist extremism, as is currently the case in Syria. Instead, by insisting on dealing with their grievances through the heavy-handed Interior Ministry, the regime alienated the Copts. Furthermore, outside the bloated security establishment and the businessmen affiliated with the regime, it was hard to find any significant sector of Egypt's population that owed allegiance to Mubarak's regime or even accepted its legitimacy to rule. Thus, the country was rocked by thousands of labor strikes, political demonstrations, and sit-ins from 2003 until 2011.

The Security Establishment

To be sure, the Mubarak regime relied on security forces from the Ministry of Interior to solidify its rule, and possibly pave the way for a succession plan to proceed uninterruptedly. Not only did he shower the police force with virtually unlimited budgets and benefits, such as subsidized housing and membership to elite social clubs, he also increasingly relied on security solutions for essentially political problems.[4]

The growth of the police's political and financial role came at the expense of that of the military establishment, a prospect with which the generals were discontent. What is more, the police force developed networks of corruption through state-land confiscations, bribery, etc. The above-the-law status generously awarded to the interior ministry by former President Mubarak encouraged them to routinely practice torture and extrajudicial detentions against political opponents of the then ruling NDP and against the general population.

Mubarak's regime became, in the words of Sudanese Political Scientist Dr. Haydar Ibrahim Ali, a "securitocracy," or a system where the security forces control most powers, enjoy disproportionate benefits, and dominate the political process.[5] The idea was to use the might of the Interior Ministry and its fearsome State

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Security apparatus to subjugate domestic opponents into acquiescence with the prospective of attaining power. The securitization of Cairo's political system proved to be the undoing of Mr. Mubarak's three-decade long reign, as it left it with too narrow a base of popular support and a disgruntled military.

When the January 25th revolution broke out in Cairo, it did not take long for millions of Egyptians to join the demonstrators across virtually the entire territory of Egypt to "demand the fall of the regime." Muslims, Christians, Bedouins, Arabs and Nubians were united in their desire to oust Mubarak from power. When the regime attempted to wage a counter-protest, they could not rally more than a few thousand, mostly paid, protesters, in contrast to the millions demonstrating across Egypt. It became clear that with the withdrawal (read defeat) of the police force on January 28th the regime had very few left to rally in its support.

In addition to the millions of civilians protesting the Mubarak regime, another crucial factor in the revolution was the military. The Egyptian military, to be sure, is no stranger to domestic politics. One may date back the forceful takeover of power by military personnel in Egypt to the Mamluk era in the late 1200s. More recently, a number of young army officers ousted Egypt's monarchy in 1952, and replaced it with a presidential republican system, where the president comes from a military background. Unsurprisingly, the military has played a dominant role in domestic politics following the coup d'état, a role that came to be centralized in the person of the general-president subsequent to the humiliating military defeat of Egypt in 1967.

As the influence and power of the interior ministry swelled in the later years of President Mubarak, the military leadership found itself short-changed. While senior-ranking police officials became millionaires through legal and illegal means, the Egyptian military has maintained its relatively transparent practices. And while the police force budget grew exponentially over the years, the Egyptian government frequently pressured the military to cut its budget requests.[6] Despite the claims of prominent Washington analysts that the Egyptian military's leadership loyalty to Mubarak was assured, because they are "well-resourced," there were simmering tensions under the surface.[7]

The military-police rivalry, and the regime's unequivocal preference for the latter, rendered the military leadership's support for Mubarak precarious. To be sure,

there are two additional reasons why the military not only intervened to expel Mr. Mubarak and associates, but also sought to secure the January 25th revolution against counter-revolutionary forces, such as the now-dissolved State Security service, *Amn al-Dawla*.

Unlike Egypt where Arab nationalism ebbed with the death of Nasser, in Syria there was a doctrinal marriage between the party and the state itself

First, the Egyptian military's strategic orientation is one of national and territorial defense, not domestic repression. Throughout the institution's modern history, it has not intervened domestically to repress the population. Conversely, and according to the Egyptian military's internal periodical *Al-Difaa*, or Defense, the military views the national security of Egypt to emanate from the extent of security and safety the citizens feel.[8] This reasoning is crystallized in the official defense dogma of Egypt's army, which stipulates that the military's fundamental objective is the protection of the country's territorial integrity and constitutional legitimacy.[9] In a way, the military's leadership perceived a greater threat to Egypt's republican constitution coming from the police-backed transfer of power plan from Mubarak the father to Mubarak the son. It is also the reason why some SCAF members publicly emphasized their opposition to the potential establishment of a theocratic system in Egypt.[10]

The mission to safeguard the republican system and its constitution has, in turn, dictated that the Egyptian military is both apolitical and non-partisan. Like all state bodies under Mubarak, the military was non-ideological as well. This absence of an ideological, partisan or political association with the regime has made the army more susceptible to siding with the protesters, and has driven the public to readily embrace it.

Second, the Egyptian army is a national institution insofar that it recruits Egyptians from all walks of life. It does not officially discriminate against soldiers or officers based on social, economic, ethnic or sectarian grounds. This inclusiveness, according to some of the generals, has rendered the prospect of using force against the public simply unthinkable.[11] It is also why some observers doubted whether the officers and soldiers would carry out orders to shoot at the demonstrators. If orders had been issued to shoot at the public, they argue army defections would have quickly ensued. Khalid Al-Laisi, an army soldier, memorably wondered: ""Who are we going to shoot? Our brothers and sisters?!"[12] Indeed, Muslims, Copts, Bedouins, Nubians, and individuals from cities and the countryside are all represented in the various divisions of the Egyptian army. The united

societal front, reinforced by a national military establishment unwilling to fire on protesters, diminished the prospects of Mubarak's regime surviving Egypt's January 25th Revolution. This much cannot be said neither of Syria nor Bahrain.

The Case of Syria

The situation in Syria could not be more different than in Egypt. Although Damascus underwent a historical political process akin to that of Egypt, where a monarchy was forcefully replaced by a pan-Arab republic, there are some stark distinctions between the two. For one, Syria's Socialist Arab Ba'ath Party, the counterpart to Egypt's Arab Socialist Union, has been a consistently domineering political force for the past several decades. Article 8 of the Syrian constitution proclaims the Ba'ath Party as "the leading party in the society and the state."[13] The Baath party officials have, therefore, been the de facto and de jure rulers of Syria. The ideology of Baathism became the doctrine of the state as well. Unlike Egypt where Arab nationalism ebbed with the death of Nasser, in Syria there was a doctrinal marriage between the party and the state itself. Hafez al-Assad was able to rule Syria unrivaled for thirty years, until he died and passed the torch to his son, Bashar, in charge for the last eleven years.

State ideology, as outlined in Syria's constitution, encourages state institutions to be loyal to Syria's singular political party, al-Ba'ath; in this fashion, the party becomes part of the state and the state becomes part of the party. This phenomenon spills over to the military, the key state institution in helping or resisting political change. The Syrian protests, which began on March 18th in the southern town of Der'a, could not be contained by the regular police force, even when backed by thugs, or *shabbiha*.[14] It was not until the military coercively stepped in that the riots there were relatively neutralized.

The Social Base

In Syria, the Allawite minority only constitutes approximately ten percent of the Syrian population but effectively controls the country's government and economy. The Allawites have been effectively in charge of the country's political and economic systems for the last four decades with massive benefits and privileges tied to the fortunes of the regime.

More significantly, beyond the Allawites, the rest of the population has thus far not been unified in its opposition to the regime. If we trace the centers of the uprising, we find them primarily concentrated in the economically-struggling agricultural villages and towns, the maligned-Kurdish north, and the cities of Homs and

Hama, which had suffered tremendous persecution at the hands of the Assads. The two largest cities in Syria, Damascus and Aleppo, have not risen up in any significant fashion. Damascus and Aleppo have many families of urban Sunni merchants, who have materially benefited from President al-Assad's four-year old economic liberalization program. According to the 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index compiled by Transparency International, Syria ranks a meager 128th.[15] Other minorities, including Christians and Assyrians, fear an Islamist takeover, should the secular Baathist regime disintegrate, and have therefore opted for the sidelines. Through corruption, co-option, patronage and intimidation many sectors of the Syrian society are disinclined to openly oppose the regime or wish for its downfall.

The Security Establishment

But what explains the Syrian army's willingness to act against the population at the behest of the ruling regime? The answer lies in the very composition of the military. The military, especially its higher echelons, is formed of officers who are members of the Baath Party. These Baathist officers not only secure undue promotions, pay-raises and a vast array of economic benefits (including tax-free new vehicles), but they also wield more authority than non-Baathist officers. This creates a parallel hierarchy within the military where the partisan affiliation of the officers, or lack thereof, dictates who is in charge, irrespective of rankings.[16]

The Syrian regime is almost-exclusively Alawite (a sub-sect of Shia Islam) in a predominantly Sunni country. To secure itself, the regime appoints Alawite officers in leadership positions in all of the security forces. Although most Syrian conscript soldiers are Sunni, the majority of high-ranking officers are Alawite, and the de facto commander-in-chief is President Bashar al-Assad's brother, Maher.[17] President al-Assad's brother-in-law Assef Shawkat is the chief-of-staff for the armed forces. Thus, effectively defections from the Syrian army occur only among low-ranking Sunni soldiers equipped with only light weapons, as heavy weapons are entrusted principally to Allawite Ba'athist officers. Aside from the mysterious death of 120 soldiers in the north, the military's officer corps has thus far shown few signs of disgruntlement or desertion. This fidelity has so far proven critical in precluding a precipitous collapse of al-Assad's regime, just as it did in the early 1980s in Hama.

This belies the superficial reading of Syrian politics as Alawite vs. the rest, or that sectarianism is *the* obstacle to successful revolts.[18] Damascus, rather, has shrewdly fortified networks of patronage and maintained a sizable, dependable constituency. It also reveals the military's abiding cohesion, despite low-level defections and the continuing crackdown on protesters.

The absence of any significant Sunni presence in the Pearl Square, the site of the sit-in, denied the Shi'a the ability to proclaim their revolt as national

The Case of Bahrain

The tiny island kingdom of Bahrain presents the only case of a popular uprising against a monarch in the modern history of the Arab Gulf Sheikhdoms. Used to ruling by decree and drawing on traditional forms of legitimacy, such as religion and clan, Gulf kings are not accustomed to having their authority questioned, let alone confronting a revolt. This is why the situation in Bahrain fleetingly promised to have repercussions that far exceeded its miniscule size. And that is also why the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) spearheaded by Saudi Arabia intervened militarily on March 14th to quell the protests in Manama, exactly one month after they began.[19] Nonetheless, we might misread events, if we assume that the Peninsula Shield forces are the only, or even primary, reason why the revolution in Bahrain did not succeed. The lack of a national consensus as well as the unconditional loyalty of the armed forces to the monarch forestalled the possibility of a peaceful power transition or the introduction of a constitutional monarchy.

The Social Base

The protesters were overwhelmingly composed of the persecuted Shi'a majority. The very grievances that led the Shi'a to demonstrate against the Sunni king are the reason why the Sunnis, who constitute thirty percent of the Kingdom's population, stood firmly behind the royal Al-Khalifa family. For decades, Manama has almost exclusively been ruled by the Sunni minority. Army, police, and government jobs are not available for Shi'a Bahrainis. Government housing projects are mostly dedicated to the better-off Sunnis.[20] Sunni foreign migrants, furthermore, are periodically granted citizenship to tip the sectarian balance. This type of formalized discrimination has incidentally forged a solid social base of support for the monarch among approximately one third of the populace. As soon as the protests started in Manama, the Sunnis organized a countervailing bloc called "the National Unity Collective," which demanded the King offer no concession to the demonstrators.[21] The absence of any significant Sunni presence in the Pearl Square, the site of the sit-in, denied the Shi'a the ability to proclaim their revolt as national. At the same time, Bahraini State TV regularly broadcasted live footage of thousands of Sunnis chanting for al-Khalifa.

The Security Establishment

Second, the Bahraini military wasted no time cracking down on the pro-democracy protesters. After only three days of demonstrations, the Bahraini army

intervened to stop the marches on government buildings, and issued communiqué No. 1 that mandated "protecting the freedoms and possessions of citizens against acts of violence, and taking all strict and deterrent measures to impose law and order."[22] This was hardly surprising, given the composition and leadership of the one hundred per cent Sunni military, headed by Field Marshall Khalifa bin Ahmad *Al-Khalifa*. In fact, according to Ali Al-Ahmad, the director and founder of the Washington-based Institute for Gulf Affairs, the Bahraini military has actively been recruiting Sunni mercenaries from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan for decades.[23] The Bahraini military, therefore, did not hesitate to violently break the protests, and secure the rule of the Al-Khalifas. Bahrain's Sunni armed forces, with the backing of anti-Shi'a Saudi Arabia, behaved rather predictably.

National consensus behind regime change and the support of a national, professional military are critical to a successful transition out of authoritarianism

Conclusion

For many protesters in the Arab world, the waters of the Jasmine Revolutions are becoming too muddy to navigate. As ruling regimes would rather see a civil war than a peaceful, democratic transition of authority, regional and global powers are increasingly standing on the fence of intervention. With North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) strikes on Libya and Saudi troops in Bahrain, Yemen and Syria might be next. For some, the relatively easy fall of Tripoli to Libyan rebels strengthens the case for intervention elsewhere. However, most policymakers are aware that Libya's small population residing on a tiny Mediterranean coast is far easier to protect than the urban dwellers of Syria. But for how long would Turkey or Saudi Arabia put up with the Syrian regime's bloody response to the uprising? Indications from Ankara and Riyadh signal that Assad's time is running out. One thing is certain, to be sure; the societal dynamics and role of the military can make all the difference in whether a revolt succeeds or stalls. These indicators determine when and why a revolt may flourish or wither away in the Arab world. Even in Libya, it would be naive to presume a stable and democratic government emerging immediately out of a bloody civil war. National consensus behind regime change and the support of a national, professional military are critical to a successful transition out of authoritarianism. For better or worse, there are not many "Tunisias" or "Egypts" at present in the region. Instead, there are many "Syrias" and "Bahrains." Many jasmine blossoms of change are not destined to see the light *yet*, even as the spring season draws to an end.

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