



**UNDERSTANDING THE RESILIENCE OF MONARCHY
DURING THE ARAB SPRING**

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Over a year into the Arab Spring, a curious pattern has come to define the revolutionary wave that has swept the Middle East. It is presidents and colonels, not kings and princes, who have proven most vulnerable to social upheaval. Civic unrest forced Zine Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia to leave the country for exile abroad, while in Egypt mass protests compelled Hosni Mubarak to cede power to military caretakers. In Libya, an armed rebellion with NATO assistance defeated the regime of Muammar Qaddafi, who lost both his office and his life. Milder earthquakes have shaken other presidential regimes, as well: witness Bashar Assad in Syria, whose regime confronts widespread uprisings outside Damascus, and Ali Abdullah Salih in Yemen, who grudgingly acceded to political transition in the context of roiling violence.

Such outcomes have led many analysts to generalize boldly: in an era of revolutionary turmoil, perhaps monarchical rule provides the safest path for autocratic perpetuity. After all, rumblings of discontent have not overthrown incumbents in any of the Arab kingdoms. Protest movements in Jordan and Morocco were defused with constitutional reform promises; more contentious youth rallies in Kuwait never questioned the authority of the reigning al-Sabah dynasty. Little opposition mobilized against the ruling families of the seven Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, while small-scale demonstrations in Oman were easily contained. Only in Bahrain did a popular insurrection threaten monarchical rule, and there local security forces supplemented by Gulf Cooperation Council troops successfully maintained royal order.

Do autocratic kingdoms brandish some special trait, such as cultural legitimacy or institutional statecraft, which makes them inherently more stable than republican dictatorships? Though the tempting response is yes, a closer glance reveals a more complex answer. Arguments extolling the innate legitimacy or strategic advantages of Arab monarchism are only somewhat convincing when put under historical scrutiny. In the current era, external factors in the form of geopolitical support and oil wealth have played a more tangible role in insulating royal leaders from internal pressures. Therein lays the true exceptionalism of monarchism in the Middle East: these authoritarian regimes *have* proven to be durable—just not for widely invoked reasons.

Dynastic resilience greatly affects American foreign policy. Internal political transitions in the Arab kingdoms will require different social and economic processes than those that upended republican dictatorships like Egypt and Tunisia. These monarchical regimes persist not out of any cultural or institutional inevitability, but because they are crafty survivors in a permissive external environment. However, since most are also linchpins of oil security and geopolitical stability, long-term American interests may be endangered if the US uses the inspiring example of the fallen republics to suddenly demand regime change elsewhere in the region. Given its considerable diplomatic, economic, and military leverage as well as the special vulnerability of the Arab kingships to the external climate, the US should carefully evaluate whether pushing for democratic reforms now realistically advances its strategic goals.

EXCEPTIONALISM REVEALED

In most of the Arab monarchies today—i.e., Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Persian Gulf littoral states of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates—reigning kings, emirs, and sultans command moderate to near-absolute power. None qualifies as a constitutional democracy, in which the royal incumbent has surrendered control over the political system in favor of a parliamentary government installed by free and fair elections. These monarchies constitute eight

out of the 22 members of the Arab League.¹

Themes of monarchical “exceptionalism” have permeated media coverage as well as academic discussions of the Arab Spring.² For many, the durability of Arab royalism impresses on two levels. First, it contravenes longstanding academic expectations. Not long after World War Two, social scientists proclaimed the obsolescence of monarchy as a viable type of regime: witness Samuel Huntington’s cynical thesis about the “King’s Dilemma,” Manfred Halpern’s strategic predictions for anti-royalist revolutions, and Michael Hudson’s later observation that the Arab kingdoms had become “an anachronism in the modern world of nations.”³ Such scholars anticipated that in the post-colonial era of independence and modernization, the traditionally despotic rule of absolutist kings was supposed to crumble in the face of new social forces like the urban bourgeoisie and praetorian military officers. This was no minor forecast; consider that in the early 1950s, the vast majority of all Arabs lived under some kind of monarchical state.

The endurance of Arab monarchism also flies in the face of global political development. Royal dictatorships in other regions had become historical artifacts by the early post-colonial era, such as Ethiopia’s imperial throne, Nepal’s Rana dynasty, and the Yamato House of Japan. When the last Dragon King of Bhutan relinquished supremacy in 2008 by ordaining his state’s first parliamentary government, it reinforced an obvious feeling that the age of monarchical authoritarianism was over. Today, beyond the Arab world only a handful of kingships exercise substantial political power over nation-states, as in Swaziland and Brunei. Most of the other 44 national monarchies reign but do not rule, and are associated with European countries where constitutionalism has long marginalized their sovereign prerogatives.

TRADITION AND LEGITIMACY

The most popular argument marshaled to explain monarchical resilience is legitimacy. Whether rooted in sacred Islamic ideals or classical tribal traditions, kings and princes wield a special cultural authenticity with Arab Muslims that presidents and generals—no matter how grandiose their military uniforms or civilian titles—simply do not have. The monarchies of Morocco and Jordan claim descent from the Prophet Muhammad; those in the Gulf command more ritualistic tribal respect. Such symbolic repute allows the typical Arab monarch, as Hudson averred decades ago, to “earn deference of his people and thus acquire authority.”⁴ More recently, Owen Kirby described dynastic rule as a “social adhesive;” the rule of kings reverberates with Arab communities because it represents a form of continuity between past and present, and thus promises stability and order during times of uncertainty and change.⁵ This cultural essence gives monarchical regimes with natural immunity to revolution. During crises, loyal subjects invest faith in their royals to right the ship rather than jump to rebellion. Even if they do mobilize protests out of frustration, they will reverently refuse to attack the monarchy itself, instead blaming economic troubles or political turmoil on other institutions and forces.

However, cultural arguments provoke some doubt. For one, it is impossible to observe or measure legitimacy in action. How do we know when society truly embraces its kingship? The evidence must be more than lack of revolution, because defining legitimacy in this way introduces tautology: by definition, *all* authoritarian regimes (monarchical or otherwise) are legitimate until they are overthrown. Moreover, it is unclear why deference to a monarchical regime stems from a distinctive cultural “mentality” while obeisance under republican dictatorships is any less authentic. More important is the question of why citizens *anywhere* would comply with autocratic governance—a generic inquiry that, as political scientists know, implicates fundamentally rational interests common to all individuals, such as fear of repression, economic preferences, and political demands, rather than mysterious cultural affinities.

Finally, there is little “traditional” about the absolutist power wielded by most Arab royals.⁶ The dynastic houses of the Gulf, such as the al-Sabahs of Kuwait and the al-Thanis of Qatar, did not wield centralized power over their lands and populations until after the British had formalized their right to rule through defense treaties by the late nineteenth century; there, imperialism reconstructed what had historically been weak and fragmented authority. Likewise, the Hashemite crown came to Jordan at the behest of the British Colonial Office after World War One, and only after a decade of political patronage did local tribal confederations begin to grudgingly obey their foreign king. Morocco’s Alaouite dynasty emerged in the

¹ Indeed, if we disaggregate the federal UAE into its seven constituent kingships, then effectively there are *fourteen* royal families that enjoy legally recognized claims to rule over some territory in the Middle East.

² See, for instance, Alan Greenblatt, “In Arab States, It’s Good To Be the King,” *National Public Radio*, 10 November 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2011/11/10/142218146/in-arab-states-its-good-to-be-the-king>; and Marina Ottaway and Marwan Muasher, *Arab Monarchies: Chance for Reform, Yet Unmet* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011).

³ Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 177-190-1; Manfred Halpern, *The Politics of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 42; and Michael Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 166.

⁴ Hudson, p. 167.

⁵ Owen Kirby, “Want Democracy? Get a King,” *Middle East Quarterly*, December 2000, pp. 3-12.

⁶ Lisa Anderson, “Absolutism and the Resilience of Monarchy in the Middle East,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 106: No. 2 (1991), pp. 1-15.

seventeenth century, but tenacious rebellions made its claimed authority a mockery until the intervention of French colonial forces in the early twentieth century finally destroyed its social opposition.

AUTHORITARIAN STATECRAFT

A more plausible explanation for monarchical exceptionalism is that these autocracies engage in strategies of institutional manipulation and opposition management—that is, *statecraft*—more effectively than republican dictators. Given that they stand “above” the political arena by constitutional design, but unlike presidents wield authority that cannot be theoretically contested by elections, kings and princes act as caretakers over the nation rather than bickering powerholders. In some cases, as in Morocco and Jordan, they can tolerate limited political pluralism that entails legal opposition and elected parliaments. Yet when crises strike, they can credibly intervene by clamping down on unruly dissent, dismissing unpopular politicians, and suspending contentious legislatures—all while securing popular support.⁷ Even in more tightly controlled political ecologies, as in Saudi Arabia, royal incumbents have long deflected public anger by scape-goating appointed political servants, including members of their own families. In this way, buffered by elite retainers and shielded by bureaucratic institutions, monarchs are seldom exposed to social opposition in the way that commoner presidents are.

This argument for statecraft is more convincing. It describes well how some autocratic monarchs sought to neutralize discontent this past year. For instance, in Morocco and Jordan, King Mohammed VI and King Abdullah II, respectively, led national campaigns of constitutional reform that disarmed some (though not all) public frustration while preserving their core executive powers. Yet herein lays the real variable: because of the highly personalized nature of absolute monarchism, the quality of statecraft reflects more the *individuals* who serve as kings (and those advising him) than any ingrained trait of Arab royalism. After all, history exposes numerous regional monarchies that have fallen before, victims of violent coups, mass uprisings, or silent depositions that they should have seen coming. Those that missed the cut include Egypt (1952), Tunisia (1957), Iraq (1958), North Yemen (1962), Libya (1969), and Iran (1979), in addition to Afghanistan (1973).

The historical record thus suggests that royal leaders can be just as unskilled and unsuccessful in statecraft as their republican counterparts, implying that monarchism alone is not a guarantor for long-term stability. Even the autocratic monarchies today extolled as master strategists barely escaped past extermination due to enemies they failed to predict, and only with the help of sheer luck. Civil conflict nearly dislodged the Hashemite crown of Jordan in 1970, and an army coup almost decapitated the Moroccan Alouite House in 1972. These paragons of statecraft are durable *because* they escaped close calls with death—not because their masterly skill foreclosed such dangerous situations from the start.

GEOPOLITICS AND OIL

Cultural legitimacy and institutional statecraft are useful and insightful arguments, and attract considerable scholarship. However, as satisfying explanations for the stability of Arab monarchism since early 2011, their logic falters. No other case shows this more than Bahrain’s failed revolution. Though sometimes marginalized in favor of more dramatic uprisings as in Libya and Syria, the Bahraini revolt was a rare episode even in the context of regional turmoil. At the height of the unrest, over 100,000 Bahrainis marched in protest of the al-Khalifa regime—an astonishing number given that the entire citizenry numbers only a bit over 600,000. If Charles Kurzman’s assertion that social revolutions seldom involve more than 1 percent of any society is true, then what this kingdom experienced was proportionally one of the greatest demonstrations of people power in modern history.⁸ By contrast, consider that even at the height of turmoil, only a fraction of a percent of the populace in Tunisia and Egypt chose to defy authority and mobilize on the streets.

Arab royalism should have provided Bahrain’s authoritarian monarchy the cultural foundations and institutional tools necessary to flourish; yet it faced a concerted political threat from a fifth of its population. How it barely survived points to a third, and the strongest, explanation for monarchical exceptionalism: a supportive international environment, which for some states means external assistance from outside powers and which for others means record oil revenues thanks to booming global markets.

Geopolitical support played a pivotal role in Bahrain, and indeed will continue to do so for all the Arab kingdoms. In March, a Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) force ended the possibility of opposition victory by helping to liquidate the protest encampment in Manama’s Pearl Square; combined with the state’s own security apparatus, the mobilization of Saudi Arabia’s military signaled the impossibility of any regime change along the Persian Gulf littoral. In addition, the US was notably silent about the kingdom’s repressive crackdown despite evidence of widespread human rights abuses, with Bahrain’s strategic importance as headquarters of the Navy’s Fifth Fleet attracting attention as the most obvious reason.

Absent both the Saudi-led intervention and Western complicity, it is plausible that Bahrain’s mass uprising could have caused

⁷ Russell Lucas, “Monarchical Authoritarianism: Survival and Political Liberalization in a Middle Eastern Regime Type,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2004), pp. 103-119.

⁸ Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 121.

the downfall of the al-Khalifa dynasty, or at least forced the familial regime to make wrenching concessions to devolve power and enact freer elections for a more empowered parliament—the kind of transformative shifts towards democracy that Arab monarchism, by its cultural and institutional design, is supposed to preclude. Put another way, the resilience of Bahrain’s royal autocracy has little to do with its inherent regime type, and everything to do with its geographic proximity.

Surplus cash from energy exports has also played a crucial role in dampening the intensity of opposition in other regional monarchies. As protests worsened throughout 2011, the Arab world’s hydrocarbon heavyweights drastically expanded their welfare entitlements and development expenditures in an effort to head off social protest. For instance, Kuwait’s al-Sabah regime granted \$3,500 to every citizen along with free foodstuffs for a year; the Saudi monarchy poured over a \$130 billion into job creation, salary increases, and development projects; Qatar similarly announced pay and benefit hikes for all public employees and military personnel.

Yet like all global capital, oil wealth circulates across borders. Bahrain’s protest movement arose not just from political grievance, but from the complaint of many Shi’a citizens about joblessness and inequality—material deficiencies stemming from the island’s relative dearth of hydrocarbon riches. In response, shortly after its successful military intervention, the GCC rolled out a \$20 billion aid package to Bahrain and Oman, essentially a regional Marshall Plan designed to spread the wealth to cash-strapped Gulf monarchies. Likewise, the GCC’s subsequent offer of membership to both Morocco and Jordan came with generous aid promises. Jordan enthusiastically responded, and quickly received billions of dollars in Saudi economic grants. Atop of profuse US aid, that cash has functioned much like oil revenues; thus the Jordanian regime has been able to maintain low food and fuel prices and increase public salaries and job creation, all the while escaping what would have been its worst budgetary deficit in history.

Much like geopolitical support, oil wealth has little to do with monarchical rule and everything to do with luck. The geological gods have been kind to a Gulf region in which six out of eight of the Arab monarchies reside, and from which black gold could further trickle into the other kingdoms in the form of aid and grants. It is important to note that the Algerian republic, too, has been blessed with oil wellsprings, which its military-dominated regime has used to also ramp up spending on jobs, housing, and infrastructure—and, like the monarchies, has seen little public opposition on the streets in return.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY: INSIGHT AND CAUTION

Why does understanding the foundations of monarchical durability matter for American foreign policy? The autocratic kingdoms of the Middle East have endured the Arab Spring less because of any special cultural endowment or institutional superiority, and more from their strategic ability to access oil revenues and external support—two dimensions of a supportive international environment. The priority of concrete international factors over amorphous internal ones like social tradition and institutional statecraft thus throws the analytical limelight onto exogenous forces, in particular the capacity of great powers like the US to reshape the region.

Rapid economic growth in the developing world, in particular China, will ensure healthy global energy demand (and thus profuse hydrocarbon revenues) for some time. However, for its part, Washington could theoretically undermine existing networks of geopolitical support that sustain the Gulf regimes, alongside Morocco and Jordan. If the US prioritized regime change over all else, it could threaten to withdraw support for individual allies: for instance, economic aid to oil-poor monarchies like Jordan and Morocco; preferential weaponry sales to militarily weak states like Kuwait; diplomatic backing to Saudi Arabia to ensure parity with Iranian influence in the Gulf; and basing agreements with indefensible littoral states like Bahrain and Qatar. Above all, it could pressure the GCC to refrain from any more domestic interventions, and marshal multilateral Western support for greater political openness in the Gulf.

Though hardly a guarantee for regime change, such initiatives could greatly weaken the Arab monarchies by exploiting their vulnerability to external pressures and crises. Yet on purely strategic terms, the US must carefully consider the implications of such a policy shift. While policymakers generally prefer dealing with democracies over dictatorships, historical perspective from other regions as well as more recent transitional cases like Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya reveals two complex, if disconcerting, truths: first, the collapse of any given autocracy does not necessarily inaugurate a liberal democratic state; and second, the process of democratization is uncertain, tumultuous, and sometimes violent—and one that may disappoint external stakeholders.

In this sense, monarchical durability in the Arab world is Janus-faced: it largely stems from a permissive and supportive geopolitical environment, but also contributes to the stability of that same regional system to enhance American strategic interests. Any determination to reorient US foreign policy in the Middle East must take into account this hard truth.