

## **Authoritarian Monarchies as an Epistemic Community Diffusion, Repression, and Survival during the Arab Spring**

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### **Abstract**

During the Arab Spring, revolutionary insurrections targeted republican dictatorships while largely bypassing the eight ruling monarchies. Popular domestic explanations for such royal exceptionalism, such as cultural legitimacy and economic wealth, not only lack analytic validity but also ignore the most pertinent reason for monarchical persistence—more effective strategies of opposition management. Presidential regimes reacted against protests with mass coercion, which radicalized opposition and mobilized further resistance, while most ruling kingships refrained from systematic violence and neutralized dissent through nonrepressive means, such as co-optation. What accounts for such striking policy convergence? This essay suggests an innovative answer: the royal leaderships atop the Arab monarchical regimes constitute an epistemic community, one predicated on not just a collective perception of threat from regional democratization, but also shared normative beliefs regarding their historical rarity and dynastic superiority. Under this framework, dense communal ties facilitated the diffusion of noncoercive strategies of opposition management, and helped enshrine promises of mutual security within existing institutions such as the Gulf Cooperation Council. Based upon a combination of historical analysis and fieldwork, this essay argues that such transnational circulation of ideas and strategies did not merely aim to prevent democracy, but specifically promoted a special subtype of authoritarianism—ruling monarchism—as a viable type of political order.

**Keywords:** Middle East, Arab Spring, authoritarianism, democracy, monarchies, diffusion, repression.

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**T**he Arab Spring stirred an unprecedented wave of protest and opposition across the Middle East and North Africa, but it did not crash against the

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ramparts of regional authoritarianism evenly. From December 2010 onward, national insurrections forced republican leaders at the helm of hegemonic parties to surrender office in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, while civil wars consumed personalistic dictatorships in Libya and (nearly so) in Syria. Yet, the eight ruling monarchies of the Arab world—Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman—persisted. Far from being anachronisms destined for overthrow as projected decades ago, absolutist kingships emerged from the regional storm no less autocratic and durable than before, seemingly impervious to revolution. The most popular explanations for such royal exceptionalism have emphasized the monarchies' superior domestic resources, such as cultural legitimacy, dynastic cohesion, and economic wealth. However, such macrostructural arguments not only ignore the numerous regional monarchies that have collapsed in the past, but also fundamentally ignore agency. Authoritarian regimes have varying methods to manage opposition and survive crises, and here royal autocracies systematically differed from their republican peers in a decisive respect: they employed far less coercion.

In general, ruling monarchies sought to demobilize protests by co-opting opposition with reform promises and welfare programs. When needed, emirs, sultans, and kings favored low-intensity repression. Critics were arrested, the media censored, and civil society harassed; but mostly absent was high-intensity coercion, or highly visible violence such as systematic killings, indiscriminate torture, and organizational liquidations. This held true even in Bahrain, which experienced the largest protests of all kingdoms but still vastly underutilized its repressive apparatus by refraining from mass lethality. By contrast, consider how republican dictators undertook the opposite approach by exhaustively utilizing their coercive firepower. They sought to bloodily squash even minor protests at their earliest stages, a destructive strategy that radicalized opposition and triggered ever-increasing cycles of mobilization. All deployed high-intensity coercion, ordering their militaries to simply open fire upon crowds to mow down oppositionists. Fortunately, generals carried out these orders only in Libya and Syria, with defections limiting the slaughter in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen.

What explains the strategic preference of the Arab ruling monarchies to sheathe their iron fists in silk gloves—to *not* unleash their coercive apparatuses, even when given the opportunity to do so? They faced stakes no less existential than their republican peers, as the unprecedented uncertainty wrought by the Arab Spring hung the specter of deposal over all. Domestic variables are necessary but insufficient to account for this because they constitute permissive conditions: resources such as oil wealth and cohesive institutions permit royal leaders to have noncoercive options of opposition management, but they do not dictate which strategy they will ultimately prefer and choose. Needed is an explanation about the origins of monarchical ideas and strategies, as well as a mechanism that accounts for their circulation across regional space. This

requires moving beyond existing domestic explanations to broach the rich international dimension.

Ruling monarchies across the Middle East share dense ties, both formal and informal. They constitute an epistemic community, one bound by common beliefs, validities, and goals. The overarching enterprise embraced by all, including not just incumbents but also many in their royal families, is sheer survival in an era in which absolutist kingship has become one of the most endangered species of political order in the world. The most important and irreducible uniting norm is the principle of dynastic superiority, or “blood over ballots”—that the rightful ruler of that society should be selected not through free and fair elections, but rather by hereditary and familial succession lines fixed by incontestable historical acts, or barring this, the incontrovertible decree of the royal sovereign himself. These regimes also share a collective religious identity as Sunni Muslim entities, a sectarian worldview organized around the imagined existential threat of Shi‘a Islam enveloping their societies.

These are more than elective affinities; they are consensual “truths” that unite these royal autocracies and cognitively shape the beliefs of ruling elites. They have engendered a communal framework that has facilitated the diffusion of ideas and strategies. The most significant, which the Arab Spring traced in sharp relief, has been the notion that compromise is more effective than coercion when dealing with popular opposition: large-scale violence only begets more unrest, whereas political co-optation and economic redistribution can defuse indigenous dissent before it swells into revolutionary fervor. Such insights have spread across transnational space, as beliefs and assumptions about the most optimal survival strategies have evolved due to exposure to common evidence and knowledge. For the Arab monarchies, these streams of information begin with perceptions of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, continuing on to the Arab Spring. In turn, these convergent preferences have encouraged royal autocracies to exploit existing institutional tools, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), in order to construct new networks of economic support and military protection for both existing members and the two monarchies that have not yet joined—Morocco and Jordan.

This essay proceeds in four parts. First, it critically re-examines the existing literature on ruling monarchies in the Middle East, noting the pitfalls of categorizing them as cases of authoritarian persistence. Claims of royal exceptionalism must also be bounded by historical period, for just as many regional kingships fell from the 1950s through the 1970s as survive today. Second, it demonstrates the underutilization of coercion by these monarchies during the Arab Spring, a peculiar finding that requires shifting from domestic structural factors such as culture, wealth, and dynasticism, to focused explorations of agency and choice. The third section intervenes by framing the eight Arab kingships as an epistemic community. Drawing upon interview-based fieldwork, historical analysis, and biographies, the essay unpacks the common beliefs and practices that distinguish these regimes from their

republican counterparts. Among them are perceptions of historical besiegement, the principle of blood over ballots, and collective sectarian identity. Finally, the essay expounds the implications of this convergence. While scholars understand the difficulty of “seeing” abstract ideas spread, additional evidence for diffusion apart from nonrepressive outcomes stems from historical processes of convergence, interpersonal interactions through marriage and diplomacy, and changes within the Gulf Cooperation Council, an organizational vehicle swiftly retooled as a counterrevolutionary cartel for monarchies.

This project speaks to the burgeoning research program on international democracy prevention. It draws upon the Middle East to renew the study of a neglected subtype of autocracy, ruling monarchism. It also warns against excessive reliance upon macrostructural profiles to explain authoritarian regime durability: domestic variables such as culture, wealth, and dynasticism may account for how royal incumbents execute their survival strategies, but not why. Third, the study crosses disciplinary boundaries by linking insights from international relations, specifically work on epistemic communities and diffusion, to domestic policymaking. At the same time, it also advances theorizing of epistemic communities: originally used to describe transnational networks of scientists, epistemic communities can also encompass illiberal actors, such as royal houses opposed to democratization, bound by knowledge and truths no less compelling in their worldview. Finally, the study reveals the difficulty of understanding the behavior of formal transnational institutions, such as the GCC, without also exposing the more informal preferences girding its member states. The GCC is as much an outcome as an actor.

### **Monarchical Exceptionalism**

A ruling monarchy is a regime in which a hereditary sovereign (i.e., the monarch) commands the executive power to dictate the policymaking agenda and allocate political resources. Eight out of the twenty-two members of the Arab League—Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf littoral states of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman—fall into this category, meaning fourteen royal families across the region enjoy a juridically recognized claim of sovereignty over a territorial space.<sup>1</sup> They are not constitutional kingships, for elected parliaments and governing cabinets (where they exist) exist primarily to implement laws and directives given from above. They lack the legal capacity to check royal sovereigns who, alongside the coercive apparatus and allied elites, enjoy near-absolutist authority.

During the Arab Spring, revolutionary strife mostly bypassed these ruling monarchies. As table 1 elucidates, little or no public protests mobilized in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman. Large demonstrations unfolded in

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<sup>1</sup> The federal UAE encompasses seven constituent dynastic families.

Morocco, Jordan, and Kuwait, but here opposition desired moderate political reforms rather than regime change. Only Bahrain suffered a popular uprising demanding a new regime. Such variation inverted the intensity of opposition witnessed in republican autocracies, in which almost all saw significant and sustained insurrections. In five, mass opposition grew and radicalized. In Tunisia, President Ben Ali fled; in Egypt and Yemen, Presidents Mubarak and Saleh surrendered, respectively. Mu'ammer al-Qaddafi, ruler of Libya, lost his office and his life. Civil war still consumes Syria and the party-state of Bashar al-Assad. Against this backdrop, the monarchies seemed to possess some “robust” affinity for survival, as not a single one collapsed.<sup>2</sup> Explaining the resilience of royalism has thus become a popular academic topic.<sup>3</sup>

Table 1. Opposition during the Arab Spring, 2011-2013

	Little or no protest mobilization	Significant protests but moderate demands for reform	Mass protests and radical demands for regime change
Monarchies	Saudi Arabia Qatar United Arab Emirates Oman	Morocco Jordan Kuwait	Bahrain
Republics	Palestine	Algeria Iraq Lebanon Sudan	Tunisia Egypt Libya Yemen Syria

What accounts for monarchical exceptionalism? Before reviewing dominant explanations, the query itself demands scrutiny. By the 1980s, the comparative study of ruling monarchism had all but ceased, kept alive only by those Middle East scholars specializing in the Persian Gulf or oil politics.<sup>4</sup> Thus, when the literature on authoritarianism surged in the 1990s, these regimes were forgotten as scholars began reclassifying autocracies into three universal

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Pierre Filiu, *The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 137.

<sup>3</sup> Sean Yom and F. Gregory Gause, “Resilient Royals: How Arab Monarchies Hang On,” *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 3 (October 2012): 74-88, and Zoltan Barany, “Unrest and State Response in Arab Monarchies,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (2013): 5-38.

<sup>4</sup> Gregory Gause, *Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1994); Michael Herb, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); and Russell Lucas, “Monarchical Authoritarianism: Survival and Political Liberalization in a Middle Eastern Regime Type,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 36, no. 1 (2004): 103-119.

subtypes—militaristic, party-based, and personalistic.<sup>5</sup> Some analysts lumped ruling monarchies into the category of personalistic rule;<sup>6</sup> others likened them to sultanism, itself an extreme form of personalistic dictatorship.<sup>7</sup> Such conflation sacrificed the conceptual identity of ruling monarchism on the altar of typological parsimony.

In scholarly perspective, such maneuvers reflected the assumption that royal autocracies were incompatible with modernity, as famously predicted by Samuel Huntington’s theory of the “King’s Dilemma,” which held that the centrifugal demands of state-building and popular participation would sweep away the highly centralized and traditionalist forms of absolutism.<sup>8</sup> Such prognostication initially held true in the Middle East and North Africa. Shortly after World War II, the vast majority of all people in the region lived under monarchical rule. Then, a steep decline of this regime subtype began, with eight kingships (including Iran and Afghanistan) unable to prevent overthrow or dissolution at the hands of domestic rivals from 1952 to 1979. As table 2 shows, royalism was far from resilient during the first three decades of the post-colonial era.

The argument for monarchical exceptionalism, thus, is not timeless. Yet, many popular explanations ignore its temporal boundary, presenting domestic

Table 2. Monarchies in the Middle East, 1952-Present

Terminated (1952-1979)	Family / Dynasty	Survivors (1979-Present)	Family / Dynasty
Egypt (1952)	Muhammad ‘Ali	Jordan	Hashemite
Tunisia (1957)	Husainid	Morocco	‘Alouite
Iraq (1958)	Hashemite	Saudi Arabia	Saud
North Yemen (1962)	Rassid	Kuwait	Sabah
Federation of South Arabia (1968)	Multiple (16)	United Arab Emirates	Multiple (7)
Libya (1969)	Senussi	Oman	Sa‘id
Afghanistan (1973)	Barakzai	Bahrain	Khalifa
Iran (1979)	Pahlavi	Qatar	Thani

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Geddes, “What Do We Know About Democratization after Twenty Years?” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999): 115-144.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Brooker, *Non-Democratic Regimes*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 61-70.

<sup>7</sup> H. E. Chehabi and Juan Linz, “A Theory of Sultanism I: A Type of Nondemocratic Rule,” in *Sultanistic Regimes*, ed. H. E. Chehabi and Juan Linz (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), 177-190.

variables that fit the Arab Spring but not the historical record. Consider the culturalist assertion that ruling monarchism commands absolute legitimacy within Middle Eastern societies because it resonates with traditional values, tribal practices, and other immutable artefacts.<sup>9</sup> Royal authority can also coincide with religious leadership, making it especially unassailable. In essence, ruling monarchism runs deeply in the cultural DNA of these Muslim societies, whereas other institutions such as parties and parliaments are alien.<sup>10</sup> However, the cultural hypothesis does not account for why eight previous ruling monarchies—which were no less Islamic, traditional, or despotic—were terminated by societal opposition decades earlier. Religious authority provides no safeguard; the Hashemites of Iraq, whose relatives still rule Jordan, enjoyed the same noble lineage from the Prophet Muhammad, which no single Gulf royal family today claims. Finally, the argument broaches tautology because legitimacy itself eludes definition. If regimes are legitimate by virtue of survival, all autocracies must be legitimate until the moment they are overthrown.

Another quality of royalism is the cohesion of regime support. Michael Herb has argued that the practice of *dynasticism*, or when leaders strategically place familial relatives in positions of state power such as royal councils, financial bureaucracies, and the military, can effectively safeguard a regime's power by preventing assassinations and coups.<sup>11</sup> Dynasticism may explain why royal incumbents faced relatively little opposition during the Arab Spring, because it has enabled rulers to maintain elite loyalty through credible commitments.<sup>12</sup> Like culture, however, this argument has historical scope conditions. Dynastic practices safeguard monarchs who fear that covetous relatives with little to lose will unseat them, or at the least refuse to defend them. That applies to the 1950s through the 1970s, when numerous royals were toppled by palace coups, military conspiracies, and familial rifts. However, during the Arab Spring, the primary threat to political order came not from elites but from the *masses*, in the form of collective actors within society such as youth movements, liberal organizations, and religious movements. Dynasticism indeed benefits monarchs, but not necessarily in this context.

Finally, two other intrinsic attributes of the Arab monarchies also correlate with recent survival: geology and geography. In accordance with theorizing on rentier states, oil and gas wealth enabled many royals to buy off dissent starting in 2011.<sup>13</sup> King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia committed over \$130

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 167.

<sup>10</sup> Bernard Lewis, "Monarchy in the Middle East," in *Middle East Monarchies: The Challenge of Modernity*, ed. Joseph Kostiner (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Herb, *All in the Family*.

<sup>12</sup> Victor Menaldo, "The Middle East and North Africa's Resilient Monarchs," *Journal of Politics* 74, no. 3 (2012): 707-722.

<sup>13</sup> Yom and Gause, "Resilient Royals."

billion toward new employment and subsidy programs. Emir Sabah of Kuwait delivered \$3,500 cash to every citizen; Sheikh Khalifa of the UAE doled out over \$3.5 billion in housing loans; Emir Hamad of Qatar furnished \$8 billion in public salaries raises. Bahrain and Omar have fewer hydrocarbon wellsprings, but even they gave concessions: King Hamad offered nearly \$3,000 to every family, while Sultan Qaboos of the latter promised a \$375 monthly stipend for all unemployed. Morocco and Jordan lacked such wealth, but netted billions of dollars in new foreign aid by mostly Western patrons with vested security interests in preventing regime change. The United States, for instance, fears that revolution in Jordan would endanger the peace treaty with Israel. However, again historical comparisons put caution into these explanations. After all, the kings of Iraq, Libya, and Iran also possessed hydrocarbon wellsprings on the eve of their ousting. The Hashemite monarchy of Iraq and the Pahlavi crown of Iran even had powerful international support; but neither the British military in the former nor American patronage in the latter immunized them from opposition revolts.

These domestic variables are important. Leaving culturalism aside, dynastic cohesion and economic rents constitute permissive conditions in that they broaden the menu of options available to royal autocrats. Dynasticism delivers committed elite support to monarchical leadership, eliminating the threat of internal discord and hence reducing political noise as it considers how to demobilize social unrest. Wealth is central to all dictatorships, since loyalty is seldom free; familial relatives may receive state positions, but citizens and constituents need other material compensation. Given these advantages, rulers can consider novel ways to maintain order. Apart from targeted redistribution, they also can engage in liberalizing reforms for their publics, such as calling for parliamentary elections, encouraging more popular participation, and holding open political debates. Such institutional adaptation shows how royal autocrats need not pull the trigger of repression against domestic opposition, and instead are able to pursue relatively peaceful survival strategies.

The problem is that while these permissive conditions make it *possible* for ruling monarchs to reject mass violence in favor of less repressive and more institutional means of engaging opposition, they do not make it *mandatory*—or even likely. Yet, the underutilization of coercive capacity is precisely what transpired during the Arab Spring. Explaining this is the next task.

## **Coercion and Survival: The Royal Puzzle**

The relationship between state repression and opposition mobilization is complex and context-dependent.<sup>14</sup> The standard expectation is that

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<sup>14</sup> Christian Davenport, “State Repression and Political Order,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (2007): 1-23.



authoritarian coercion can squelch opposition. However, different degrees of rights violations have distinctive effects. High-intensity coercion entails highly public acts of often-lethal violence committed by civil and military forces, such as extrajudicial killings, organizational terror, and indiscriminate torture; low-intensity coercion uses softer means of nonlethal containment that involve civil but usually not military units, such as nonlethal crowd dispersal, targeted detention, and legal prosecution. Statistical evidence based upon the world's nearly one hundred authoritarian regimes since 1972 shows that high-intensity coercion often fails to prevent regime deposal.<sup>15</sup> Qualitative evidence abounds: in the Iranian Revolution, for instance, the constant brutalization of popular protests had a cyclical effect, by sparking larger and more radical antiregime rallies.<sup>16</sup> That trend is what unfolded during the Arab Spring. As table 3 illustrates, casualty data from the eight most lethal republics and monarchies show the greater the lethal violence inflicted upon society, the more likely that collective action would escalate and eventually upend the regime.

The data cover 2011, the first and most contentious year of the Arab Spring, and thus the earliest window to observe each regime's preferred strategy. All autocracies wielded large civil security, ranging from policing units to domestic intelligence services and smaller but more heavily armed militaries. Even excluding the abattoir of Syria, royal autocrats restrained their coercive impulses far more than their republican colleagues, inflicting vastly lower numbers of deaths and injuries. Every republican ruler ordered his militaries to open fire on crowds; only one kingship, Bahrain, allowed its armed forces to become involved at all.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the Khalifa dynasty of this island-kingdom was the most violent monarchy, but its repressive sentinels inflicted less than a fifth of the fatalities reported in the least violent republic that collapsed, Tunisia—remarkable, given that most Tunisian casualties had occurred by mid-January 2011, whereas deaths in Bahrain stemmed from protests that spanned the entire year. Of course, this should not whitewash the actions of any regime: almost all deaths entailed the tragic slaughter of citizens desiring democracy. Even the Jordanian monarchy, which killed only one person across thousands of demonstrations, does not escape opprobrium. During the Arab Spring, dictators murdered. Yet, those from royal backgrounds murdered less.

One obvious critique is that the scale of opposition mobilization differed across cases. For instance, it may be unfair to compare the Egyptian uprising, which involved hundreds of thousands across the country shouting the resonant

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<sup>15</sup> Abel Escribà-Folch, "Repression, Political Threats, and Survival under Autocracy," *International Political Science Review* 34, no. 5 (2013): 543-560.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), and Benjamin Smith, *Hard Times in the Land of Plenty: Oil Politics in Iran and Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> Casualty rates in Tunisia and Egypt likely would have been far higher had the armed forces not refused to carry out presidential directives to open fire.

chant of the Arab Spring—“*al-sha‘b yureed isqaat al-nizaam*,” or “the people demand the downfall of the regime”—with the Omani or Saudi Arabian protests, which involved at most several thousand demonstrators in small cities outside the capital calling for reform. However, the size and scope of popular uprisings was *endogenous* to coercive responses. The earliest protests of all countries were identical: they involved no more than a few hundred unarmed participants calling for freedom and dignity in peripheral areas of the country. Yet, the more violent the initial reaction, the more those small-scale protests progressively evolved into national movements for regime change. The enormous crowds seen in downtown Cairo were the result of failed opposition management, not the cause.

Low-intensity coercion, on the other hand, did not swell and radicalize the ranks of opposition. Qatar and the UAE are among the most closed autocracies in the world, even by regional standards, but chose to deal with incipient dissent through soft means (e.g., arresting journalists, censoring publications, and fining activists). Jordan and Morocco saw thousands of protests during 2011, which their monarchies sought to outlast through patience and reforms. In the former, disengaged police officers handed water bottles to marchers, while in the latter security forces followed orders of nonintervention. When security personnel did disband reformist crowds, they used nonlethal weaponry, such as batons, tear gas, and rubber bullets, rather than loaded firearms. During 2012, protests in Jordan and Morocco dissipated rapidly after Kings Abdullah II and Mohammad VI, respectively, promulgated constitutional reforms that did not so much reconfigure their authoritarian monopolies of power as signify to their publics that royal palaces had heard—and responded to—national discontent, unlike republican despots.

The argument that ruling monarchies underutilized their coercive apparatus also applies to Bahrain. Here, the Khalifa regime suppressed a national revolt that at its height mobilized over 150,000 participants, or one out of every four citizens. If Charles Kurzman’s assertion that revolutions seldom involve more than one percent of the population is true, what transpired was proportionally one of the greatest displays of people power in history.<sup>18</sup> Protests for democratic reform began on February 14, drawing upon both the Shi‘a majority and Sunni minority. While security forces resisted with nonlethal weaponry and arrests, they also shot a small but continuous trickle of protesters, whose deaths instigated steadily larger crowds. In mid-March, King Hamad received a 1,500-strong Saudi-led military force sent under the mantra of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and thereafter imposed a swift crackdown that dissolved most organized opposition. This was not bloodless; the regime’s own commission of inquiry conceded its grotesque abuses, such as targeted torture of activists, demolition of public spaces, and indiscriminate attacks on Shi‘a citizens.

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<sup>18</sup> Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution*, 121.

While such violations were reprehensible, what did *not* occur was the killing of hundreds or thousands of oppositionists, even though the regime had reason to take such extreme measures. An overwhelming quarter of its citizenry had mobilized, not long after King Hamad had watched autocrats in Tunisia and Egypt crumble. The monarchy had the opportunity to enforce high-intensity coercion, as the United States would not intervene, given its desire to maintain cordial relations with a government that tolerated its large naval base nearby. The GCC armed contingent was a weapon of potential destruction; constrained by neither international condemnation nor fear of reprisal, those troops, alongside the monarchy’s civil and military guardians, could have exterminated with abandon. Yet, in reality, the leadership took extra measures to restrain repression. GCC units were assigned to protect public buildings but could not directly confront activists. Bahraini forces bashed bodies with batons and tear gas, but lacked the authorization to mow down demonstrators with live ammunition.<sup>19</sup> Such restraint is striking compared to republican responses. Just days after this March crackdown, small protests broke out in the Syrian city of Dara‘a; within one week, the Assad regime’s security forces killed more citizens than the entire 2011 death toll for Bahrain, thus beginning the Syrian Civil War.

The Arab world’s ruling monarchs, even in the direst of crises, had the capacity but not the will to wreak such bloody havoc. The convergence of such preferences reflects the epistemic community silently linking these royal autocracies together.

Table 3. Most Lethal Regimes by Subtype during First Year of Arab Spring, 2011 (Excluding Syria)

	Republics (collapse)				Monarchies (persist)			
	Tunisia	Egypt	Yemen	Libya*	Oman	Morocco	Saudi Arabia	Bahrain
Opposition Killed	340	840	2,000	4,000	3	5	16	51
Opposition Injured	2,140	6,470	20,000	30,000	46	120	150	2,150
Agents of Coercion	Civil (but ordered military to kill)	Civil (but ordered military to kill)	Civil and Military	Civil and Military	Civil	Civil	Civil	Civil and Military

Sources: U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Arab Human Rights Organization, and Agence France-Presse.

\*Libyan figures are estimates and include civilians and rebels.

<sup>19</sup> Bahrain Independent Commission, *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry* (Manama, Bahrain: BICI, 2011).

## Blood over Ballots: Epistemic Ties

Within international relations, constructivist theorists originally conceptualized epistemic communities in order to better explain how states behaved in decision-making scenarios pervaded by complexity and uncertainty. Epistemic communities were originally defined as transnational networks of professionals, such as experts and activists, who possessed authoritative knowledge in a defined field and were linked by shared normative beliefs, standards of validity, and unifying goals.<sup>20</sup> They enabled the diffusion of ideas across state boundaries in ways that reduced and simplified the policymaking process. In this manner, policy coordination among different state actors reflected convergent preferences produced not necessarily through formal organizational strategies, but rather as a result of common exposure to evidence and knowledge as circulated by epistemic communities.

Such framing of epistemic communities swam in positive overtones. Among the issues that such networks decisively shaped across borders, for instance, were nuclear arms control, environmental protection, and biotechnology.<sup>21</sup> The related scholarship on diffusion explained how, regardless of their source, the transnational circulation of ideas could facilitate the emulation of behaviors and policies across regions: that is, the probability that actors in one place will adopt a behavior or policy rises when they first occur in proximate locales. Such a process helps describe the spread of democratization within and across geographic regions through learning, from the adoption of similar reforms among governments to the mimicry of protests among activists.<sup>22</sup> Such terminology also describes the Arab Spring, in showing the startling and rapid spread of protests across borders.

Yet, ideas diffused by epistemic networks do not have to be liberal, nor must socially constructed ties agree with democratic ideologies. Nor must those individuals necessarily hail from technical backgrounds, as scientific expertise constitutes just one type of specialized knowledge. Indeed, the nascent research program on democracy prevention recognizes this. Norms rewarding authoritarian behavior can circulate within regions, for instance, as dictators wish to share “best practices” as much as democrats desire to protect

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<sup>20</sup> Emanuel Adler and Peter Haas, “Epistemic Communities, World Order, and the Creation of a Reflective Research Program,” *International Organization* 46, no. 1 (1992): 367-390, and Mai’a K. Davis Cross, “Rethinking Epistemic Communities Twenty Years Later,” *Review of International Studies* 39, no. 1 (2013): 137-160.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Haas, “Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination,” *International Organization* 46, no. 1 (1992): 1-36, and Clair Gough, “Respectable Politics of Climate Change: The Epistemic Communities and NGOs,” *International Affairs* 77, no. 2 (2001): 329-345.

<sup>22</sup> Beth A. Simmons, Frank Dobbin, and Geoffrey Garrett, “The International Diffusion of Liberalism,” *International Organization* 60, no. 4 (2006): 781-810, and Mark Beissinger, “Structure and Example in Modular Political Phenomena: The Diffusion of the Bulldozer/Rose/Orange/Tulip Revolutions,” *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 2 (2007): 259-276.

rights.<sup>23</sup> In this vein, royal elites, who include incumbents and senior familial relatives, constitute an epistemic community. This communal framework did not spontaneously crystallize during the Arab Spring, although that crisis spurred an unprecedented degree of cooperative engagement and policy coordination; rather, it has gradually evolved over decades, with the 1979 Iranian Revolution serving as a major trigger. Formal institutional behaviors, such as the intervention and expansion of the Gulf Cooperation Council, express this convergent preference for monarchical perpetuation. That convergence stems from three shared beliefs: a perception of historical besiegement, the principle of blood over ballots, and hard-line Sunni sectarianism.

Observers of the Arab Spring argued that during 2011, an unprecedented sense of danger befell autocratic leaders who previously had felt impregnable.<sup>24</sup> More accurately, among Arab royals, it amplified the acute vulnerability felt since the Iranian Revolution. That 1979 destruction of the Pahlavi throne radiated shockwaves: unlike royal overthrows by military conspirators, such the 1969 Libyan coup, the Shah was overwhelmed by popular protests spearheaded by millions defying repression.<sup>25</sup> That unarmed citizens could overcome the region's largest military apparatus, one armed with the latest American technology with unparalleled capacity to murder, transformed the Iranian episode into a "reference" model that cognitively disassociated mass violence from the arena of successful survival strategies when dealing with opposition.<sup>26</sup> So jarring was this lesson that most Gulf monarchies contemplated creating new organs of popular participation, such as consultative councils. This was remarkable because not all Arab royals had warmed to the Shah, and such participatory initiatives occurred during the Iraq-Iran War, which pitted the Arab states against the Islamic Republic.<sup>27</sup>

The Iranian Revolution also raised new self-awareness that absolutist kingships had become an endangered species of human government. Until the twentieth century, ruling monarchism prevailed over much of the world, and the politics of royalism constituted a solemn field of study. Thereafter, and especially after World War II, either foreign wars or the "King's Dilemma" steadily exterminated many royal autocracies, both within and beyond the Middle East. Well beyond the Arab world, many prominent dynasties faded into obscurity, from Ethiopia's imperial throne to the Yamato House of Japan. As recently as 2008, the last Dragon King of Bhutan relinquished his

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas Ambrosio, "Constructing a Framework of Authoritarian Diffusion: Concepts, Dynamics, and Future Research," *International Studies Perspectives* 11, no. 4 (2010): 375-392.

<sup>24</sup> Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> Nikki Keddie, *Iran and the Muslim World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), 112-126.

<sup>26</sup> Confidential interview with member of Sabah royal family, Kuwait, March 8, 2007.

<sup>27</sup> J. E. Peterson, *The Arab Gulf States: Steps towards Political Participation* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1988).

family's political supremacy. Today, only a handful of kingships still command authoritarian power, such as in Swaziland and Brunei; most of the other forty-four existing monarchies reign but do not rule.

This carries significance for royal elites, whose advanced education (often in Western universities) and observations reified the fact that, once extinguished, ruling monarchism almost never returns to a society.<sup>28</sup> The Shah of Iran recognized this not long before his overthrow; private diaries characterize the imperial court as being “rattled” by antimonarchist coups in Libya in 1969 and Afghanistan in 1973, reminding the ruler that those families had lost their seat in history forever.<sup>29</sup> Today, Arab royals recall more recent evidence, such as how almost no Iraqis and Libyans called to restore their monarchies after the destruction of their dictatorships, or how few Tunisians even remember Husainid rule.

That sense of historical obsolescence coincides with a second shared truth—dynastic superiority, or blood over ballots. In prescriptive terms, such a pillar insinuates that the most qualified ruler of society must come not by institutional machinations, such as competitive elections or popular referendum, but rather through the established mandate of hereditary succession lines. In every ruling monarchy, those lineages are determined by historical events that are beyond contestation. In Morocco, for instance, the post-colonial restoration of the ‘Alouite crown in the 1950s required the disqualification of distant familial branches from succession. In Kuwait, a similar fate has befallen all members of the Sabah family outside the singular branch of Mubarak the Great, who took power in 1896; they may enjoy the perks of royal obeisance but not political power. Only the decree of a sitting king can modify the pool of potential rulers by promoting or demoting favored relatives, which frequently occurs in Saudi Arabia to change agnatic seniority.

The principle of blood over ballots extends to all commoners, with the following implication: the *worst* member of a royal family in terms of achievement, education, and aptitude has more right to rule than the *best* commoner from society. Presidents who dynastically attempt to personalize their regimes by colonizing political positions with family relatives lack this norm. Notably, most of the republican autocrats who faced revolutionary opposition during the Arab Spring exercised nepotism in which power was designed to pass from father to son.<sup>30</sup> Claims for hereditary succession do not rest on grounds of genetic endowment or historical symbolism. Rather, they articulate pragmatic, and thus more contestable, justifications about the

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<sup>28</sup> Confidential interview with member of Hashemite royal court, Amman, Jordan, June 21, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Asadollah Alam, *The Shah and I: The Confidential Diary of Iran's Royal Court, 1968-77* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1991), 90-91, 305-306.

<sup>30</sup> Larbi Sadiki, *Like Father, Like Son: Dynastic Republicanism in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009).

benefits of continued prosperity or stability should a trusted son take over from his father.<sup>31</sup>

Yet, the continuity of blood is not only a strength but also weakness. Royal elites understand that incumbency carries high stakes, because a single overthrow can shatter an entire dynasty's access to the state. The pressures of "holding the line" thus come not only from clients of the regime, such as economic cronies, but also from the incumbent's own relatives. Whereas an ex-dictator may live in isolated shame, a former monarch must face reproach from the entire *family*, which once deposed loses most privileges (e.g., diplomatic immunity, political obeisance, and economic riches). King Hussein of Jordan, who ruled from 1952 to 1999, inscribed a telling passage in his autobiography written after the 1950s, which saw the rise of Arab Nationalism and the extirpation of three regional kingships (including his Hashemite relatives in Iraq):

I had seen enough of Europe, even at seventeen, to know that its playgrounds were filled with ex-kings, some of whom had lost their throne because they did not understand the duties of a monarch. I was not going to become a permanent member of their swimming parties in the South of France.<sup>32</sup>

In memoirs and biographies, past monarchs evoked similar sentiments. In Kuwait, Emir Sabah labored under family insistence to reject demands from the liberal opposition and maintain the family's regal standing during the 1965 crisis.<sup>33</sup> In Morocco, King Hassan cited the desire to enshrine the legacy of his palace family when purging the army of officers suspected to have orchestrated the 1972 coup attempt.<sup>34</sup> In Bahrain, Sheikh Salman bin Hamad feared the consequences upon his family in the face of Leftist protests in 1956, steeling the resolve to cooperate with the British pressure to resist.<sup>35</sup>

A final shared belief is the sectarian vision that Shi'a Islam, considered heretical by Sunni legal jurisprudence and symbolized by Iran, which threatens to overrun the lands of Sunni Islam, which the Arab monarchies partly represent. The identification of Sunni Islam with ruling monarchism stems from the Iranian Revolution, as the new Islamic Republic encouraged revolutionary

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<sup>31</sup> Jason Brownlee, "Hereditary Succession in Modern Autocracies," *World Politics* 59, no. 4 (2007): 595-628.

<sup>32</sup> HRM Hussein bin Talal, *Uneasy Lies the Head* (New York: Random House, 1962), 46.

<sup>33</sup> Robert L. Jarmon, *Sabah al-Salim al-Sabah, Amir of Kuwait 1965-1977* (London: Arabian Publishing, 2002).

<sup>34</sup> HRH Hassan bin Mohamed, *Le mémoire d'un roi* [The memoir of a king] (Paris: Plon, 1993).

<sup>35</sup> Andrew Wheatcroft, *The Life and Times of Shaikh Salman Bin Hamad al-Khalifa* (London: Routledge, 1995).

sentiment among Shi'a communities in the Sunni kingdoms.<sup>36</sup> Monarchical regimes perceived the potential for revolutions as real. The 1980s produced not just a rise of terrorism by Shi'a Islamists, partly inspired by the Lebanese Civil War, but also renewed frustrations among long-marginalized Shi'a. Bahrain felt the brunt, as its Shi'a majority had long chafed against its marginalization by the Khalifa regime. Saudi Arabia also saw a surge of unrest in its Shi'a-heavy Eastern Province.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, in Kuwait, despite their century-long record of support for the Sabah regime, Shi'a citizens were purged from administrative institutions and security organs out of royal paranoia.<sup>38</sup>

Projected fears of Shi'a Islam eventually spread to the other monarchies. When the War in Iraq devolved into civil war along sectarian lines, the monarchies of Morocco and Jordan—which have almost no Shi'a minorities, and have never needed to compete with Iran for strategic influence—embraced this primordialist worldview.<sup>39</sup> In both, official presses and royal spokespersons insisted that even a handful of Shi'a Muslims could operate like fifth columns, spreading subversion and sacrilege alike.<sup>40</sup> During the Arab Spring, the Bahraini uprising combined with amplified uncertainty renewed millennial concerns about Shi'a Islam. Those with Shi'a communities feared fresh insurrections, while those without declared that Shi'a militancy could invade their societies.<sup>41</sup>

### **Diffusion, Convergence, and Conflict**

For the ruling monarchies of the Arab world, epistemic ties have carved out an imagined cooperative that has diffused nonrepressive strategies of opposition management. Researchers on diffusion concede the difficulty of literally “seeing” concepts spread across space until their eventual adoption into policy. In this context, primary evidence comes from the consistent underutilization of coercive capacity by the ruling monarchies, indicating a preference for peaceful strategies of engagement over high-intensity coercion and mass violence. However, absent outcomes, establishing diffusion through epistemic

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<sup>36</sup> F. Gregory Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 46-51.

<sup>37</sup> Toby Jones, “Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery: Modernity, Marginalization, and the Shi'a Uprising of 1979,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38, no. 2 (2006): 213-233.

<sup>38</sup> Lori Boghardt, *Kuwait amid War, Peace, and Revolution: 1979-1991 and New Challenges* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 39-102.

<sup>39</sup> Morten Valbjørn and Andre Bank, “Signs of a New Arab Cold War,” *Middle East Report* 242 (2007): 6-11.

<sup>40</sup> Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 227-254.

<sup>41</sup> Genevieve Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 2013).



communities requires evidence of several corollary processes—marked convergence of policies prior to those outcomes, and interpersonal behaviors that facilitate the circulation and discussion of preferences.

First, prior policy shifts *away* from repression occurred in the monarchies but not in the republics. Before the 1980s, virtually all autocracies in the Middle East committed widespread violence. The Jordanian army slaughtered more than five thousand during the Black September civil war of 1970. Tens of thousands of Moroccans disappeared during the “years of lead,” spanning the 1970s and 1980s. The Saudis regularly crushed tribal and Shi‘a unrest with paramilitary troops drawn from different regions to boost their lethal efficacy. Similar events occurred within the Arab republics; high-intensity coercion was the norm. Beginning with the 1980s, however, Arab republics began monopolizing extreme violence. In Syria, the Assad regime did not exceed the lethality of its 1982 Hama massacre, which claimed over 10,000 civilians, until the current civil war. Over 150,000 perished in the Algerian Civil War during the 1990s, while in Iraq Saddam Hussein killed well over 100,000 Iraqi Kurds in the late 1980s. Even when militaries did not participate, republican autocrats brutalized with efficiency: by 1992, President Ben Ali of Tunisia had liquidated the Ennahda Islamist movement following its peaceful participation in general elections, directing the police and intelligence to capture and torture up to 25,000 activists.

Second, intermarriage bonds royal elites far more than their republican peers. Data compiled on marital ties among blood members of ruling families since the Iranian Revolution, including both royal and presidential varieties, reveal twelve cross-dynastic marriages. Royals from Jordan and Qatar have contributed nearly half these ties (though seldom to each other), but other monarchies have also participated.<sup>42</sup> Morocco and Saudi Arabia are bound in a different way: sisters from the prominent Solh family of Lebanon married senior princes from both dynastic houses, establishing regular patterns of royal visitations.<sup>43</sup> By comparison, no presidential family member has married a prince or princess in this time period. Only one betrothal connects a senior official from a republican autocracy to an Arab royal—the marriage of Prince Ali al-Hussein of Jordan to Princess Rym, daughter of Ambassador Lakhdar Brahimi of Algeria.

Intermarriage creates patterns of regularized social interactions, a hallmark of epistemic communities. Another conduit of engagement entails congregations among sovereigns or their deputies (e.g., crown princes, prime ministers, and vice presidents). Between 1980 and 2013, the public record reveals that royals officially engaged one other over 320 times, and with

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<sup>42</sup> The lone exception is Oman, where Sultan Qaboos has ruled since 1970 but lacks heirs.

<sup>43</sup> Saudi royals visit Morocco far more frequently than any other locale save nearby Dubai.

presidents a little over three hundred times.<sup>44</sup> These engagements represented formal events such as bilateral state visits, letter exchanges, phone discussions, and multilateral summit meetings. The comparison stands more starkly against several caveats. First, there are eight monarchies but nine republics in these data—Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya. Of these, Egypt singly contributed to over 25 percent of all republican interactions, because the headquarters of the Arab League is located there. Second, nearly 25 percent of all royal-to-presidential interactions stem from two periods: engagement between the Sabah family and the Arab republics, especially Egypt and Syria, during the Gulf War period, when it initiated furious shuttle diplomacy to restore its emirate from Iraqi occupation; and vigorous outreach from Iraq during 2007-2008, when the nascent government began to aggressively restore its national profile across the region after emerging intact from civil war and ongoing insurgency. Third, 75 percent of all events involving royals entailed the presence of the emir, sultan, or king, whereas presidents directly participated in only about 50 percent of the events.

These data suggest that, all things being equal, ruling monarchies have directly interacted with one another more frequently than with sovereigns and political elites from republican autocracies. They share more interactions, some quite intimate and others purely diplomatic, a record that implies the creation of shared understandings, if not convergent preferences.

Even so, additional evidence for the Arab epistemic community originates at another level of analysis—the institutional shift of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The GCC was founded in 1981, a direct reaction to the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq-Iran War, as an organizational alliance among Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman. Its architects envisaged security coordination that could deter regional warfare and tighten economic integration.<sup>45</sup> It failed at both. The GCC could not prevent the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait or the more recent War in Iraq. Indeed, against Iran, the GCC has little credibility as a military actor, as its members mostly rely upon American security guarantees. Unifying economic initiatives such as a common currency have languished on paper; its customs union has struggled in implementation.

During the Arab Spring, the GCC shifted institutional focus. Rather than safeguarding external borders, the GCC began to enshrine efforts by monarchies to maximize *domestic* security. The March 2011 intervention in Bahrain consisted of mostly Saudi troops, but the mission statement was articulated through the GCC framework so as to signify collective action. Responding to nearby protests, the GCC kingships also promised \$20 billion

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<sup>44</sup> Includes documentation culled from Lexis-Nexis and World News Connection between 1980 and 2013, including newspapers, newsletters, magazines, and briefings.

<sup>45</sup> Rouhollah K. Ramazani, *The Gulf Cooperation Council: Record and Analysis* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988).

in economic aid to less wealthy Oman and Bahrain. The Saudi monarchy also extended offers of membership. Such a union would be incongruous; Jordan has a single seaport on the Red Sea, while Rabat is as close to New York City as Riyadh. Still, while the Moroccan regime wavered, King Abdullah acceded. During 2011-2013, nearly \$3 billion in Gulf economic aid arrived in Amman—cash grants that staved off fiscal calamity and enabled new social-welfare spending.<sup>46</sup>

That the GCC became a forum to address the pacification of social unrest implies solidarity among royal elites. However, it does not imply harmonious relations in all issue domains. For instance, diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Qatar chilled during 2013, as they had championed different factions within the Egyptian transition and Syrian Civil War; one Saudi official even threatened to close the Qatari border at the March 2014 Arab League Summit. In historical perspective, however, such frictions mark the norm among the Gulf kingdoms. Constant disagreement was precisely why the GCC failed to materialize as either a credible security alliance or an economic union. Decades before the Arab Spring, Bahraini and Qatari quarrelled over ownership of nearby islands, leading to intervention by the International Court of Justice; Saudi-Qatari border skirmishes continued even after the Gulf War; and as late as 2010, Emirati and Saudi naval vessels exchanged fire over disputed maritime boundaries.

Given this backdrop, the standard for the institutional viability of the GCC is not the elimination of all tension but rather whether its monarchical members continue to coordinate policy and promulgate a shared understanding of how best to survive when an existential threat looms. Classic examples of epistemic communities qualify this. Environmental scientists, for instance, may bicker during periods of normalcy, refusing to support one another on issues such as tenure or publication. Yet, that same network coordinates the rapid transaction of ideas when a collective crisis threatens a unifying goal, such as when a global policy initiative to reduce carbon emissions is about to fail. Thus far, this applies to the GCC, which remains the only formalization of monarchical unity in the region.

## Conclusion

Comparative scholars have long identified the Middle East with durable authoritarianism. This essay has rendered visible another reality, one that holds true even after the Arab Spring: the region is also the world's last cradle for absolutist kingships. This perspective helps explain why these monarchies pursued nonrepressive strategies of opposition management. Tied by a

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<sup>46</sup> Sean L. Yom, "Jordan: The Ruse of Reform," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 3 (2013): 127-139.

growing sense of historical besiegement, linked by dynastic superiority, and spurred by sectarian militancy, they constitute an epistemic community that has allowed for the diffusion and circulation of ideas—in particular, the notion that mass violence does not always stifle protests, as the Iranian Revolution demonstrated. Convergent preferences, interpersonal interactions, and institutional organization signify the presence of this communal framework, one that will likely deepen should another wave of contentious politics sweep over the region.

Such findings have implications for future research. First, authoritarian rulers should be viewed as holders of knowledge in their own right, and, however unsavory, are capable of the formal and informal networking associated with democratic diffusion. Second, not only concrete tools such as military invasion and foreign aid, but also soft variables such as norms and beliefs can explain policy coordination over time and space. Finally, institutional expressions such as the GCC hold importance, not only as actors but also as outcomes of preferences that are not given, but *made*. Both agency and structure matter.