

## REVIEW ESSAY

### Public Response to Authoritarian Regimes in the Middle East

Hiroki Takeuchi (htakeuch@smu.edu)

Southern Methodist University (SMU)

Saavni Desai (saavnid@smu.edu)

Southern Methodist University (SMU)

#### ABSTRACT

How does people's response to repressive authoritarian regimes shape the subsequent strategic interactions between people and regimes in the Middle East? This review essay discusses how the recently growing literature on the Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes helps us to answer this question. We draw empirical evidence from Lisa Blaydes's *State of Repression: Iraq Under Saddam Hussein*, Dana El Kurd's *Polarized and Demobilized: Legacies of Authoritarianism in Palestine*, and Elizabeth Nugent's *After Repression: How Polarization Derails Democratic Transition*. The word "dictatorship" typically brings to mind monolithic images of a repressive regime where people lack legitimate recourse to respond to the regime. However, drawing on archival material, original in-depth interviews, public opinion surveys, and cutting-edge experimental data, these three books illuminate the complexities of political life in Saddam Hussein's Iraq (Blaydes), Palestine (El Kurd), and Egypt and Tunisia (Nugent). They demonstrate why certain people choose to collaborate with the regime while others work to undermine it, how polarization among people created under the authoritarian regime threatens democratic transition, and why well-intentioned international intervention may weaken people's capacity to confront the regime. Overall, they offer new explanations of why and how state-society interactions in the authoritarian context can induce unexpected negative effects on the regime's resilience and the capacity for nation building.

[This paper is a work in progress in the fullest sense. Please do not cite without the first author's permission. Comments and criticisms are welcome.]

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## REVIEW ESSAY

### Public Response to Authoritarian Regimes in the Middle East

Lisa Blaydes. *State of Repression: Iraq Under Saddam Hussein* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 354 pages, paperback, \$24.95.

Dana El Kurd. *Polarized and Demobilized: Legacies of Authoritarianism in Palestine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 226 pages, hardcover, \$51.99.

Elizabeth R. Nugent, *After Repression: How Polarization Derails Democratic Transition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), paperback, \$27.99.

Despite the Arab Spring uprisings mostly failing to bring desired lasting progress toward democracy, Steven Cook maintains that the future of the region lies in the hands of the people who live there.<sup>1</sup> How does people's response to repressive authoritarian regimes shape the subsequent strategic interactions between people and regimes in the Middle East? How do authoritarian responses to challenges and popular protests shape democratization movements? Why are authoritarian regimes in the Middle East considered unstable and less resilient (compared, for example, with China)?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Steven A. Cook, *False Dawn: Protest, Democracy, and Violence in the New Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> On the debate about the resilience of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, see Eva Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics* 36(2): 139–57; Eva Bellin, "Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring," *Comparative Politics* 44(2): 127–49. On the resilience of China's authoritarian regime, see Hiroki Takeuchi and Saavni Desai, "Chinese Politics and Comparative Authoritarianism: Institutionalization and

This review essay discusses how the recently growing literature on the Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes helps us to answer these questions. By drawing empirical evidence from Lisa Blaydes's *State of Repression: Iraq Under Saddam Hussein*, Dana El Kurd's *Polarized and Demobilized: Legacies of Authoritarianism in Palestine*, and Elizabeth Nugent's *After Repression: How Polarization Derails Democratic Transition*, we explore whether and how public response matters for regime resilience. Each in its own way, these three single-authored books under review demonstrate why certain people choose to collaborate with the regime while others work to undermine it, how polarization among people created under the authoritarian regime threatens democratic transition, and why well-intentioned international intervention may weaken people's capacity to confront the regime. While the authors discuss various case studies and emphasize strategic interactions between different actors, overall they offer new explanations of why and how state-society interactions in the authoritarian context can induce unexpected negative effects on the regime's resilience, its capacity for nation-building, and the people's ability to confront the regime.

The word "dictatorship" typically brings to mind monolithic images of a repressive regime where people lack legitimate recourse to respond to authoritative practices. However, drawing on archival material, original in-depth interviews, public opinion surveys, and cutting-edge experimental data, these three books illuminate the complexities of political life in Saddam Hussein's Iraq (Blaydes), Palestine under Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) (El Kurd), and Egypt and Tunisia before and after the Arab Spring (Nugent). To strengthen their own power or the resilience of the regime, authoritarian leaders who can monopolize decision-making in their countries do not sustain dominance through repressive tactics alone but pair this with a

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Adaptation for Regime Resilience," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 22(4) (December 2021): 381–92.

certain level of responsiveness to the public.<sup>3</sup> They co-opt parts of the population while repressing other parts of it. Given the tenuous binary of repression and co-optation taken by authoritarian leaders, we argue that public response is significant and matters for regime resilience for two reasons. First, the binary strategy institutionalizes vested interests, which divide citizens and their capacity to confront the regime as some people have access to private goods such as social and economic rewards. In Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes, vested interests curtail the expression of public preferences through civil society; however, an institutionalized mechanism for public preference and government response is necessary for democratic transition to work. Second, the combination of repression and co-optation produces a wide range of unexpected societal outcomes on how citizens relate to each other and to the state—including ideological polarization, political identity, and social cohesion. These unexpected outcomes amplify the perceived threats faced by authoritarian leaders, exacerbates the paranoia that they feel, influences their survival strategy to choose between repression and co-optation, and as a result may undermine their capacity for good governance and the likelihood of regime resilience.

### **Repression and Unexpected Outcomes**

In almost every case, the autocratic leader is aiming to strengthen their own power or the resilience of the regime. This is accomplished through co-opting parts of the population, or

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce Dickson makes a similar argument to explain the resilience of China's authoritarian regime under one-party rule by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). He argues that the CCP maintains its power by both repressing and responding to its people. See Bruce J. Dickson, *The Dictator's Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Bruce J. Dickson, *The Party and the People: Chinese Politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

recruiting individuals into the folds of the government, while repressing other parts. This binary strategy ensures that the behaviors of individuals in an authoritarian context fall into one of two categories: through co-optation, the regime establishes authority and control over the population by bolstering the security apparatus and providing private rewards for officials and bureaucrats to repress and refrain from participating in uprisings against the government. Through repression, at least in theory, the government aims to significantly weaken the population's ability to confront the regime, and this is achieved through economic underdevelopment and punishment. While financial and coercive incentives motivate citizens to comply in "fear of sanction or promise of inducements" (Blaydes, p. 36) such as rents, public goods, and jobs or promotions, repressive strategies across different populations in a state can actually negatively impact state control and regime resilience. This occurs as a result of paranoia and incomplete information on part of the regime as good governance and institutionalization of government roles, which typically combat these phenomena, are overshadowed by institutionalized vested interests. Without a guaranteed, secure transition of power or an institutionalized bureaucracy to combat issues of illegibility and incomplete information, authoritarian leaders resort to large-scale, indiscriminate punishment that breeds social cohesion, ideological polarization, and political identity as well as how capable those identities are in confronting the regime.

In an analysis of Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Lisa Blaydes highlights how "indiscriminate punishment by political regimes tends to backfire" (p. 37) and how the regime's failure to accurately identify non-compliant citizens and groups and consequently resorted to punishments that were too intense and imprecise to yield positive results for regime acquiescence. Two major groups experienced strengthened political identity and social cohesion as a result of Ba'ath party punishment under Hussein, namely the Kurds and Shi'a Muslims across

Iraq. In both cases, collective punishment on smaller social groups resulted in “communalism” within “a cultural group, a religious community, or an extended kinship group” (p. 14), suggesting that sectarianism, a damaging force against regime compliance, was “a result of an interaction between unfavorable underlying conditions and damaging government policies where economic sanctions elevated the salience of sectarian identities” (p. 11).

During the Anfal Campaign in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War, the Kurdish population in Hussein’s Iraq faced “brutal and collective forms of state-imposed punishment” that “encouraged social cohesion at the level of the ethno-sectarian group” (p. 135). Prior to the Iraqi repression of Kurds, this group was divided by language barriers, regional factions, and tribal lines. At this time, Kurdish nationalism did not extend to the lower and middle class. However, “challenges associated with identifying transgressors” in Kurdish-occupied northern regions resulted in blunt state punishment as army units utilized “chemical and high explosive bombardments that killed without discriminating between regime supporters and opponents.” It also led to economic blockades aimed to “lower the morale of villagers. Under such directives, foodstuffs and other basic supplies were totally blocked” (p. 152). As Kurds, including Kurdish local advisors that were allied with the government, experienced this overreaction in the form of widespread punishment and began to see a shared political fate, “feelings of Kurdish nationalism became common among ordinary Kurds” (p. 148). The regime’s use of terror, ethnic cleansing, and economic barriers had adverse impacts on its goal of enforcing compliance through repression, giving rise to a nation “born out of the deeply emotional, national traumas of the Anfal” (p. 154) that was then more able to confront the regime with a socially and politically unified group.

Similar impacts can be drawn from the repression of the Shi'a religious organizations, which posed a threat to political and religious unity under the Ba'athist regime. Hawzas, or centers for Shi'a clerical learning, and the Da'wa Party, a Shi'a populist Islamic group, were both viewed as "oppositional forces [that] would use religious cover to drive a wedge between the Ba'ath party and the masses" (p. 242). At first, Hussein attempted to use "alternative approaches to managing the religious domain" (p. 246) as widespread repression remained politically undesirable as it may foster broader religious resentments. Some of these approaches included Arabifying the hawza curriculum, co-opting Shi'a clerics, offering financial or party incentives to religious leaders, monitoring clerical activity, indoctrinating hawza students, and "replacing existing religious elites with ones amenable to the regime" (p. 251). However, these approaches failed to curb the rise of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, an important figure in the establishment and founding of the Da'wa Party. As the party gained traction, paranoia and a failure to achieve Baqir al-Sadr's public support of the Ba'athist regime led to his arrest and execution along with "widespread repression against Da'wa Party activists" (p. 245) and their families. Party membership became punishable by death, crackdowns aimed to reduce organizational capacity, and relatives of party members were reshuffled into different government positions to "reduce the regime's security vulnerabilities" (p. 245) among other attempts to dampen the popularity of opposition parties. The adverse effects of regime repression were heightened with the rise of Sadiq al-Sadr, cousin of Baqir al-Sadr and a high cleric able to gain significant support among Shi'a masses by emphasizing the shortcomings of the regime. Tensions escalated alongside Sadrist transgressions, public demonstrations, and growing efforts of the regime to curb opposition. Eventually, this "opened the door to regime repression in a way

that encouraged the merging of political Islam and clerical authority” and “high levels of solidarity within the group” (p. 257).

The cycle of opposition, repression, and rising political and social solidarity is not limited to the case of Ba’thist Iraq. In fact, while some literature finds that tension exists between the authoritarian regime and its people inherently, Blaydes contends that the regime’s oppressive activities *create* animosity and tension, increasing solidarity, polarization, coordination, and resistance, and ultimately results in a cycle of oppression. This is further supported by Elizabeth Nugent’s analysis of Egypt under the Hosni Mubarak regime. Mubarak continued a “divide and conquer” strategy initiated by his predecessor, Anwar Sadat, but switched its target to the Muslim Brotherhood, “more regularly and more harshly repressing the Muslim Brotherhood as a matter of normal policy” (p. 162). Through mass arrests, continuous security raids, and military tribunals resulting in longer sentences and brutal treatment of Muslim Brotherhood members, the Mubarak regime aimed to “create internal chaos within the Brotherhood” (p. 163). This treatment was markedly different from that of leftist party members, who often received significantly lesser sentences and “were treated better than other political prisoners while in custody” (p. 165).

The targeted approach to repression of this Islamist political party had profound effects on their ability to confront the regime and mirrored the developments occurring in Hussein’s Iraq. Nugent emphasizes the psychological, social, and organizational impacts on the Muslim Brotherhood. Through its isolating repressive approach, the Mubarak regime fostered a sentiment of collective, explicit victimhood among Brotherhood members stemming from the Brotherhood being subject to “the ugliest shades of injustice, abuse, and racism” (p. 167). This was further bolstered by the bureaucracy’s information gathering, which provided information



“about the differences between groups” and created “increasingly divergent identities among the larger opposition” (p. 166). On the social level, the regime strategically divided identities within the country’s prisons so that “prisoners were separated and isolated [which] forced socialization *within* groups rather than *between*” (p. 168). While from the regime’s perspective, this may have curbed a broader opposition movement, it also strengthened social cohesion and “group members’ identification with the group at the expense of an identity linked with a broader collective opposition” (p. 170). Like in the case of Shi‘a Muslims and Kurds in Iraq, the heightened sense of group identity bolstered anti-regime sentiment and organizational development. In fact, the Brotherhood exhibits the direct link between an increasingly intense targeted repressive environment and the increasing conservatism of the group. Experiences faced by the Brotherhood created “members more strongly aligned with the Brotherhood’s ideology, objectives, and norms as the exclusivity of Brotherhood identity became stronger” (p. 171). These shifts in party culture coupled with polarization culminated in a party platform reflecting “strong Islamist preferences” in 2005 and a new feature articulating its preference “for an increased role for religious institutions in more effectively implementing shari‘a” by 2007 (p. 184). Over time, the Brotherhood’s preferences strayed further and further from other Mubarak opposition parties that were centered on secularization. Egypt’s highly polarized society, partially provoked by the radicalization of the Muslim Brotherhood, in the years leading to the Arab Spring explains its failure in achieving significant change during the uprisings. Mubarak’s targeted repression, in this case, bred more effective opposition for individual groups while also polarizing society enough to weaken the public’s ability to confront the regime. Despite shared interests across parties to reform the existing regime and state to incorporate democratic values, polarization between political opposition over the role of religion in politics left Egypt too

divided to affect any real change. Nugent furthers the analysis of Kurds and Shi'a Muslims in Hussein's Iraq by allowing for study of the impacts of targeted repression on an organized political opposition group. While in Egypt repression worked to divide the public enough to hinder effective opposition, it is possible that psychological, social, and organizational consequences of repression breed parties that are highly cohesive and adept in influencing meaningful change. This occurs as a result of widespread repressive regimes, however, as seen in the case of Tunisia under Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Over the course of Ben Ali's rule, "repression came to affect nearly all opposition groups, regardless of whether they held legal or illegal status" (p. 103). In the early years of Ben Ali's succession in 1987, the Ennahda, an Islamic opposition group, became the first targets of arrests and major crackdowns carried out by Ben Ali's ruling party, the RCD Party (*Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique*: Democratic Constitutional Rally). Toward the tail end of Ennahda crackdowns, illegal "socialist and center-left motivating ideologies became the next victims of the regime" (p. 108). This was followed by repression of legal opposition groups and even loyal opposition that splintered from the ruling party in the 1990s. In the final years of his rule, the party expanded its highly repressive behaviors to suppress remaining opposition through the passage of terrorism laws. These laws encompassed "nearly any form of opposition to the regime," including personal enemies of Ben Ali and his family, and essentially legalized regime activities with the support of the international community and even the United States, which was determined to fight the War on Terror. This comprehensive, indiscriminate punishment led nearly all opposition groups to hold similar experiences of physical and psychological torture, imprisonment, and even exile at worst and "surveillance, physical threats, and other arbitrary restrictions" (p. 134) at best. The regime, while aiming to break political detainees' commitment

to political opposition, unintentionally cultivated a sense of entitativity and collective groupness alongside the more intentional atmosphere of terror. Unlike the victimhood that explicitly fueled the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, increasing identification as a victimized group gave rise to a broader opposition movement in Tunisia.

This broader movement, now encompassing various political ideas, strengthened non-political party organizations focused on more general principles of reform and resistance such as human rights abuses, arbitrary detention, and democratic reforms” (p. 142). This meant that despite the fragmentation of individual groups these groups did not polarize as in the cases of Hussein’s Iraq and Mubarak’s Egypt. Rather, it facilitated cohesion of political identity, shared victimhood, and continued struggle against a highly repressive regime. Together, these fostered party platforms, manifestos, and formal agreements that “converged on central issues of state identity” and “did not advocate an extreme division between religion and politics, or a total influence of religion and politics” (p. 150) but instead “protected differences of opinion regarding these matters” (p. 155). This sense of unity carried through to the Jasmine Revolution in 2011, which unseated Ben Ali, and even into 2013 with a process initiated by the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet to unite 12 political parties to roadmap Tunisia’s transition. Seeds of social cohesion and civil society sowed by widespread repression created the document calling for a “new technocratic government, an independent electoral commission” (p. 138) and the completion of a new constitution. This constitution created a balance between the president, head of government, and parliament. Tunisia exhibits how regime activities affect public expressions of discontent and whether or not these attempts at confronting the regime are successful in inspiring legitimate change. In this analysis, it is clear why and how the public response to

authoritarian regimes do matter, and how it is in the hands of the regime to control its own resilience.

The Palestinian territories offer an interesting case with two layers of governance, Israel and the PA. Dana El Kurd extensively discusses the effects of these two repressive regimes upon Palestinians' ability to confront the regime. While in Israeli occupied areas repression manifests in the standard tools against the collective, "Israel outsources much of its repression to the PA as an indigenous governing authority." The impacts of an outside repressive force (i.e., Israel) versus an internal repressive regime (i.e., the PA) differ significantly and are obvious in the marked disparities between the first and second intifada. In the first intifada, Israel was viewed as a common enemy for Palestinians, and grievances of rising Islamist groups centered around "opposition to the political establishment's negotiations with Israel" (p. 81). Despite its inability to achieve a contiguous Palestinian state, collective repression against Palestinians led to a high degree of social and political cohesion that allowed the forces of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) to coordinate with forces on the ground and for local organizers and institutions to more directly organize uprisings. Failures of the first intifada, then, point more to President Yasser Arafat's repression and co-optation of these groups along with general inefficiency against Israeli forces rather than polarization and tension between groups. The second intifada, however, was uncoordinated and generated infighting between opposition groups. El Kurd contends that "the PA's growing repression, backed by Israeli demands for an end to resistance groups, led to increased insularity within groups and grievances between them" that resulted in an even less effective attempt to confront the regimes. Islamist groups also faced challenges as "repressive exclusionary strategies increased polarization to the point of inhibiting cooperation altogether" (p. 83) following Hamas's legislative victory. The Palestinian leftist

factions also faced difficulty coordinating with other groups “as some groups decided to work with the PA while others maintained their opposition to the state building project” and maintaining autonomy to use Fatah controlled PLO funds, which were used as “a tool to pressure and control leftist factions” (p. 84). These measures fostered internal fragmentation of opposition groups, both Islamist and leftist, that in conclusion were unable to effectively influence the regime toward democratic principles. Through a combination of repression and co-optation in PA led areas, the PA dramatically decreased political mobilization by polarizing opposition groups despite shared sentiments against Israeli occupation and demands for an independent Palestine.

It is often perceived that in an authoritarian context, the public conforms to the conditions and restraints placed by the regime. In many cases the regime’s lack of information, resources, and stability drives it to overreact through repression, which can either unite or divide the public. This reaction to issues raised by the domestic and international threats to regime survival may turn out to be suboptimal. We argue that the public response to unite or divide along party, ethnic, religious, or other lines in response to the regime’s repressive strategies, while shaped by conditions created by the regime itself, can yield unintended consequences that negatively impact the regime’s ability to repress and positively impact the public’s capacity to confront the regime, both of which contradict the regime’s inherent goal of long-term survival. While other strategies may offer more optimal solutions to domestic and international threats, the fact that complete information, sufficient resources, and stable transitions to power are not institutionalized nor warranted in the authoritarian context limits the options of the regime’s binary strategies of repression versus cooptation. In attempts at democratic transitions, the divisive intentions under authoritarian regimes in the Middle East seemed to have succeeded in

some capacities and in some states, such as in Hussein’s Iraq, Mubarak’s Egypt, and Palestine under the PA. However, arguably a better understanding of the intentional impacts of the regime’s repression may make the public more resistant to these strategies, which may make democratic transitions unsuccessful. Public awareness of the divisions intentionally created by the regime could allow opposition groups to unite rather than divide over the very lines used to silo these groups and limit their effectiveness.

### **Co-optation and Institutionalized Vested Interests**

Designing institutional ties to the state by creating shared interests with societal groups is a common practice to generate regime support. Financial incentives motivate citizens to comply in rents, public goods (turned to private goods), and jobs or promotions. For example, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has employed the co-optation strategy, by building the “revolving door” between the CCP and state-owned enterprises, to prevent the capitalist system from threatening China’s one-party rule.<sup>4</sup> In fact, co-optation of societal groups is one of the CCP’s survival strategies with which CCP is quick to adapt to the world trend of economic globalization and technological advancements.<sup>5</sup>

In the context of the Middle Eastern authoritarian context, Cook argues that institutionalized vested interests are stronger than civil society or institutionalized governance in state-society relations, noting that “because institutions in any society reflect the interests of those who have political and economic power, leaders can be expected to leverage the prevailing

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<sup>4</sup> Jie Chen and Bruce J. Dickson, *Allies of the State: China’s Private Entrepreneurs and Democratic Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Kellee S. Tsai, *Capitalism Without Democracy: The Private Sector in Contemporary China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Dickson, *The Dictator’s Dilemma*; Min Ye, *The Belt Road and Beyond: State-Mobilized Globalization in China, 1998–2018* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

rules of the political game to keep, maintain, and reinforce their privileged positions.”<sup>6</sup> Empirical studies of Middle Eastern politics have provided various accounts on how institutionalized vested interests cause the malfunction of institutionalized governance under the authoritarian regime. For example, Lisa Blaydes in her earlier work shows that because Mubarak’s regime in Egypt manipulated the distribution of public goods to keep winning authoritarian elections the regime failed to make effective governance systems to provide public goods.<sup>7</sup> In fact, what originally sparked the Arab Spring was not people’s demand for democracy per se but their economic grievances against inequality, poverty, and stagnation caused by a paucity of economic and political reforms.<sup>8</sup>

Blaydes in *State of Repression* explores how Saddam Hussein’s Ba’th Party regime in Iraq increasingly shifted the balance from co-optation to repression. She discusses the Ba’th regime’s nation-building efforts during the 1970s, showing that Iraq was more of party-based dictatorship whereas the provision of public goods was one of the sources of regime’s legitimacy at that time.<sup>9</sup> These efforts, which aimed to industrialize, build infrastructure, spend more for

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<sup>6</sup> Cook, *False Dawn*, p. 157.

<sup>7</sup> Lisa Blaydes, *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak’s Egypt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Moreover, in another regional context of comparative authoritarianism, Beatriz Magaloni suggests that Mexico’s Institutional Revolutionary Party used fiscal transfer to subnational governments as a means to maintain one-party rule. See Beatriz Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> The article written by an author who uses a suggestive assumed name “Cassandra” once pointed out the stagnation of structural economic reforms as a source of political crisis for the authoritarian regime in Mubarak’s Egypt. See Cassandra, “The Impending Crisis in Egypt,” *Middle East Journal* 49(1) (Winter 1995): 9–27. For a comprehensive political economic explanation on the origins of the Arab Spring, see Omar S. Dahi, “Understanding the Political Economy of the Arab Revolts,” *Middle East Report* 259 (Summer 2011). Available at <https://merip.org/2011/06/understanding-the-political-economy-of-the-arab-revolts/>.

<sup>9</sup> In their comparative large-N study of authoritarian regimes, Barbara Geddes et al. find that a party-based dictatorship tends to be more resilient than a military or personalist dictatorship. It is partly because a party-based dictatorship has more incentives to provide public goods. See Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work: Power,*

education, and create jobs, laid the foundation of the support for Hussein and the Ba‘th Party. During this period of unprecedented government spending, “oil fueled Iraq’s economic expansion and was critically important in the nation-building process” (p. 63). The oil boom “increased both citizen investment in the regime as well as citizen dependence on the state” (p. 62) as the Party became a seemingly responsive and accountable primary institution in Iraq. Nation-building efforts also included cultivating a national identity to move the Iraqi populace away from religious, tribal, and regional cleavages and toward an Iraqi or Arab identity. To do this, the regime sought integration through the national economic developmental programs and a “deliberate de-emphasis on sectarian identity in regime rhetoric and policy” (p. 70). Blaydes concludes that in the 1970s there was “a relatively high level of citizen investment in the regime...[and] Hussein had successfully consolidated political power, culminating in his accession to the presidency in 1979” (p. 79). In short, in the 1970s Hussein’s regime in Iraq was an ordinary party-based authoritarian regime which maintains its power by both repressing and responding to its people.

Although oil strengthened the regime, the dictator’s distrust of people’s loyalty—especially those who live in oil producing areas—resulted in the regime’s overreaction, which eventually caused the regime’s breakdown. The tenuous binary of repression and co-optation had helped the Ba‘th regime endure in the 1970s, but this balance shifted increasingly toward repression since the 1980s. The over-reliance on repression unified various groups of people, including the Kurds living in oil producing areas, while only vested interests had originally unified ethnic and societal groups. All of the nation-building efforts adopted by the Ba‘th Party

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*Personalization, and Collapse* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018). In fact, Erica Frantz finds that party-based dictatorships last an average of 26 years, compared to 11 years for personalist dictatorships and 7 years for military dictatorships. See Erica Frantz, *Authoritarianism: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).



reflected the standard course of action for other party-based authoritarian regimes, but Hussein's deliberate efforts to personalize power during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s made it impossible for Iraq to return back to an ordinary party-based dictatorship after the Gulf War and the post-war UN sanctions in the 1990s—when the state lacked the financial capacity and institutional strength to enforce enduring control over its people. While the conventional wisdom is that tension exists between the regime and its people inherently, Blaydes contends that the regime's over-reliance on repression *creates* animosity and tension, which results in a cycle of increasing repression and further resistance. In sum, she convincingly argues that a *regime's* policy to encourage compliance and control resistance “influences forms of political identity that becomes salient within the population” (p. 308), refuting traditional beliefs that structural defects exist inherently when “citizens identify with their ethnic or sectarian group over their national identity” (p. 316). Although the oil boom was able to support public goods and institutionalization of the Ba‘th Party's one-party rule, the regime's failures stemmed from the dictator's overly aggressive responses to foreign and domestic threats and inability to target dissenting individuals as opposed to groups. And while the institutionalization of the Ba‘th Party had created a virtuous circle, the personalization of the regime later created a vicious circle.

Perhaps Tunisia is an exception of the infestation of institutionalized vested interests. In Tunisia, civil society organizations—most famously the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet—actually aided in democratization. As a result, the regime has been more responsive to public preferences and hence public response matters for political outcomes. In many of the Middle Eastern regimes, vested interests curtail the expression of public preferences through civil society. However, in Tunisia vested interests and civil society are able to interact and balance with each other.

Nugent argues that different forms of repression under the authoritarian regimes led to divergent trajectories taken by Egypt and Tunisia during democratic transitions. Indeed, while a decade after the Arab Spring hopes for democracy have disappeared in violence and renewed state repression, experience in these two countries shows different political outcomes. For example, in January 2014 on the third anniversary of President Ben Ali's flight, Tunisia's political elites passed a new constitution that is one of the most liberal in the Arab world while Egyptians passed the referendum to approve a new constitution that gives more power and immunity to the military and the police than the constitution during the Mubarak era. Nathan Brown, a leading political scientist specialized in the Middle Eastern politics, was quoted in a *New York Times* article describing what happened in Egypt as "train wreck" while noting Tunisia's democratic transition as "everybody keeps dancing on the edge of a cliff, but they never fall off."<sup>10</sup> In short, Tunisia is considered an example of democratic success while Egypt is one of authoritarian reversion.<sup>11</sup>

In many of the Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes, institutionalized vested interests decrease the public's capacity to confront the regime by dividing citizens as some people have access to vested interests while others do not. Ironically, the same consequence was brought by targeted repression under Mubarak's Egypt. Nugent notes that "the type of perceived threat faced by a ruler when coming to power determines the nature of all types of institutions adopted by authoritarian leaders for coercion, co-optation, and survival" (p. 61). It is because "reward and

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<sup>10</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick and Carlotta Gall, "Arab Neighbors Take Split Paths in Constitutions," *New York Times*, January 14, 2014. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/15/world/middleeast/arab-neighbors-take-split-paths-in-constitutions.html>.

<sup>11</sup> For a comprehensive comparative analysis of the post-Arab Spring divergent paths between Egypt and Tunisia, see Eva Bellin, "The Puzzle of Democratic Divergence in the Arab World: Theory Confronts Experience in Egypt and Tunisia," *Political Science Quarterly* 133(3) (2018): 435–74.

punishment structures influence citizen beliefs and, when taken together with incentives, beliefs and incentives generate behaviors” (Blaydes, p. 36). Conventional wisdom finds that the Muslim Brotherhood was unable to govern due to its radical Islamism, when in reality it was due to the treatment of the Muslim Brotherhood under the Mubarak regime. Nugent argues that “the [targeted] repression facilitated the creation and strengthening of unique political identities *within* different opposition groups, rather than one in which shared victimhood was a common feature *across* groups” (p. 175; italics in the original).

While Blaydes and Nugent discuss domestic determinants of how the regime strategically chooses between repression and co-optation and how public responds to the regime’s binary strategy, El Kurd introduces the international dimension to the strategic interactions between the regime and people in Palestine. She argues that U.S. support, including economic aid, for the PA has *created* private rewards and economic rents. She writes: “Donors, and the United States in particular, emphasized a ‘good governance’ framework in a way that was incompatible with Palestine’s economic and political conditions” (p. 10). In other words, U.S. exercises have generated institutionalized vested interests. El Kurd highlights that “the PA’s repression is more effective and more damaging...because it is an indigenous authoritarian regime” (p. 3), and U.S. influence has led to unexpected consequences of incentivizing state repressive practices. In other words, well-intentioned international intervention resulted in the “polarized and demobilized” situation observed in the Palestinian authoritarian context, as she describes: “The second intifada was markedly different from the first in that there was no unified leadership, and grassroots organizations did not direct strategy as they had in the past” (p. 11).

## **International Factors and State-Society Relations in the Authoritarian Context**

[Under Construction]

While repression and co-optation both profoundly affect the public's ability to confront the regime and successfully initiate a democratic transition, external factors—namely international intervention, inter-state war, and colonial legacies—can also impact the public response. These external factors can mirror the impacts resulting from repression and co-optation by influencing trends and developments in ideological polarization, political identity, and social cohesion in a given society. The Iran-Iraq war in Hussein's Iraq, American involvement in Palestine, and the colonial legacies of Britain and France in Egypt and Tunisia respectively, all demonstrate how factors outside the state's sovereign borders can alter the public response and its effectiveness.

- Iraq (Blaydes) – Hussein's aggressive treatment of the Kurdish ethnic group in the years during and after the Iran-Iraq War demonstrate how paranoia and fear inspired by international events such as war with another country, in this case Iran, can lead regimes to target certain groups brutally and collectively. The Anfal Campaign from 1986 to 1989 reflects the Ba'ath Party's response to "Kurdish insurgent groups who engaged in cross-border collaboration with the Iranian armed forces" (p. 149). The combination of a regime fearful of this collaboration and its potentially destabilizing impacts along with the "[l]imited ability to 'see' Iraqi Kurdistan during the Anfal Campaign" (p. 151) prompted the regime to engage in a cleansing of the Kurdish countryside to "deprive Kurdish nationalists safe haven and material support from local populations" (p. 150). The campaign involved forced population movement, economic blockades, mass arrests, and indiscriminate attacks on villages. These overreactive and unselective measures

aimed at protecting the regime from opposition actually yielded the unintended consequences of progressing in-group trust and cohesive political identity. By 1988, Iraqi Kurdish leaders had “resolved to put aside sectarian differences within the nationalist movement...to pursue their [unified Kurdistan Front] shared demands for autonomy” (p. 155).

- Palestine (El Kurd) – The negative consequences of Israeli settlement and state development for Palestinian confrontational capacity are clear in their unifying effect among Palestinian nationalists; however, El Kurd points to an alternate source of “authoritarianism” that unintentionally reduces the capacity of the Palestinian public to achieve a successful democratic transition or at least progress toward that goal. This source is the American involvement, which according to El Kurd “has led to negative repercussions for state-society relations and levels of authoritarianism” (p. 135). U.S. recognition of the PA as a legitimate authority over parts of Palestine since 1993 has legitimized the PA’s actions. This legitimacy allows the PA to institutionalize corruption and vested interests by providing the means to distribute private goods and to co-opt parts of the population and repress others, leading to polarization among the Palestinian people and further entrenchment of the PA in authoritarian practices. Borrowing El Kurd’s words, U.S. provisions of arms, security training, as well as legitimacy to the PA allows the PA to “rely on repression a tool for silencing public opposition” (p. 136) rather than making concessions to the public in the face of demands for reform and better governance. This trend of PA’s authoritarianization is furthered when considering how American involvement facilitated the polarization and insulation of elite leadership in Iraqi Kurdistan is applicable to the case of Palestine. In Iraq, the “Kurdish territorial

aspirations” of the central government overtook the public need to create “sustainable and responsive institutions in Iraqi Kurdistan” (p. 135), which is similar to what is happening in Palestine today. Long term, sustainable institutions that may be more capable of initiating a shift toward democratization or liberalization remain undeveloped in Palestine as the central government’s aspirations are able to trump public demands without surrendering the U.S. support, which in these cases “has been defined by support for the status quo” (p. 135).

- Egypt and Tunisia (Nugent) – Nugent sheds light on how colonial legacies influence the future of state-society relations in independent states. She argues that “contemporary authoritarian leaders inherit certain coercive institutions and states with...predetermined resource endowments and institutional capacities” (p. 62). This means that “post-independence authoritarian coercive capabilities are shaped by pre-independence institution-building” (p. 63). Aspects vital to the success of European colonialism such as coercive capabilities ensuring internal security, intelligence collection to control political participation and mobilization, and cooptation of local opposition remain “sticky” even post-independence. More importantly, preferences and driving factors specific to colonial powers shape *how* these aspects are utilized in a colony, which also remains sticky in modern authoritarian contexts. French colonialism, which “fully dominated and subdued” (p. 67) colonized populations, differed markedly from British colonization practices. The French approach never fully indigenized the police force, lacked a meaningful connection between intelligence gathering and local informants, and relied on a decentralized intelligence analysis system at the local and country levels (pp. 68–70). This resulted in “decentralized and fragmented security apparatuses... [with] a decreased ability to

effectively collect and analyze intelligence... produc[ing] repression which is reactive... [and] indiscriminate, because exact threats cannot be pinpointed” (p. 73). On the Contrary, British colonialism involved heavily indigenized local police forces and populations to “divide, conquer, and co-opt local partners” (p. 69), while building strategic relationships with local allies and centralizing and bureaucratizing intelligence gathering apparatus. These key differences enabled British colonies to act preemptively and take more targeted repression strategies against actual threats only when necessary.

In the Middle East, independence from colonial powers was not translated into building new governing institutions, but rather an appropriation of the institutions that had been developed and utilized by their former colonizing power. In Tunisia, maintenance of the decentralized structure of governing and intelligence gathering institutions resulted in a force with “inefficient collection and use of intelligence [that] continued to plague Tunisia under Habib Bourguiba” (p. 80). This had similar impacts in Tunisia under Ben Ali, which meant indiscriminate, widespread punishment that unified the people and strengthened their capacity to confront the regime. On the other hand, Egypt’s adoption of the highly centralized, pervasive, and relationship based system meant “gathering intelligence through a large network of informants... [for] significant targeted police repression” (p. 88). This coercive apparatus remains in effect under Mubarak, resulting in targeted repression that divided the opposition and made the public response less effective overall. Nugent’s analysis of the effects of colonialism on modern authoritarian practices offers a nuanced view of how external, international factors play a key role in the effectiveness of public response, and why analyzing past external factors is critical to understanding modern state-society relations in authoritarian regimes.

## **Conclusion: Future of Democratization of the Middle East**

[Under Construction]

We have argued that in the authoritarian context of Middle Eastern politics public response may play significant roles for regime resilience because the regime's repressive and co-optative strategies bring unintended consequences on public response and state-society relations. In the situation called the incomplete information problem—where actors in a strategic interaction lack information about other actors' intention and capabilities—when the regime cannot readily observe or measure the threats it confronts, these unintended consequences exacerbate the authoritarian leader's paranoia and lead to the regime's overreaction to public acts, which may make the regime less resilient. It is inevitable for this problem to arise because the regime lacks sufficient resources to co-opt everyone, so leaders may make mistake on who they should distribute their limited resources to optimize the likelihood of regime's survival.

Based on the most systematic and rigorous analysis on the Arab Spring, Jason Brownlee and his coauthors provide parsimonious explanations for why leaders were (or were not) ousted and for why institutional change did (or did not occur), and conclude that “if one had wished at the Arab Spring's outset to predict which of our four cases of regime breakdown [i.e., Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen] would become a democracy, mere reference to gross developmental indicators (such as per capita income) would probably have been sufficient.” In other words, they argue that the trajectories after the Arab Spring may just be explained by economic factors. However, our analysis in this article suggests that results of the Arab Spring cannot be explained by economic factors alone, but also by the strategic interactions between public and the regime in state-society relations prior to uprisings. The regime's actions alter the conditions in which the public is responding, but by understanding those factors the people may be better equipped for



such impacts of regime actions, allowing for more intentional coalitions and identities to arise in opposition to a common “enemy,” the regime, rather than with other opposition groups. This raises the likelihood of democratization and political liberalization. In conclusion, the public response does matter even in an authoritarian context, and this response has the potential to move toward democratization if responses to regime actions are more conducive to a unified public that is aware of the potential divisiveness of regime actions.