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RESILIENT ROYALS: HOW ARAB MONARCHIES HANG ON

Sean L. Yom and F. Gregory Gause III

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The Arab Spring might just as well be called the Arab *Republics'* Spring. Since December 2010, the wave of uprisings and protests across the Middle East has produced spectacular changes in the region's authoritarian republics but has largely bypassed its autocratic monarchies. Tunisia's President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali fled the country, Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak effectively transferred power to the military, and Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh acceded to a transitional framework. Revolts in other countries triggered more violent reactions. In Libya, “Brother Leader” Muammar Qadhafi perished in an insurrection, while in Syria, President Bashar al-Assad's single-party dictatorship teeters on the brink of collapse.

The eight Arab monarchies, by contrast, stand firm. Saudi Arabia and Oman saw only isolated protests, while in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) virtually no dissent mobilized. In Jordan and Morocco, youth-driven oppositionists filled some streets but failed to rouse the masses. In Kuwait, popular protest stemmed from long-running tensions between parliamentary factions and the ruling family rather than any new political demands. Only Bahrain has seen large-scale unrest, but the ruling al-Khalifa clan has weathered it, aided by the armed intervention of the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

In short, the scorecard of the Arab Spring neatly divides by regime type. Monarchies fared far better than republics. The popular belief has been that Arab kings and princes are “sitting on their thrones fairly comfortably,” secure against the winds of change.¹ To explain this striking

correlation between regime type and regime persistence, many analysts have pointed to culture and institutions. The cultural approach holds that Arab kingships enjoy traditional religious and tribal legitimacy, which induces exceptionally loyal support from citizens. Meanwhile, the institutional approach contends that because kings organizationally stand above everyday politics, they can skillfully intervene in the system to spearhead controlled reforms that defuse public discontent. Dynasticism, wherein royal blood relatives monopolize key state offices, further helps to keep the regime intact.

Yet such explanations do not hold up under scrutiny. For one, in March 2011 a social revolution nearly *did* succeed in Bahrain—a crucial counterexample that we shall revisit later. More generally, the postcolonial record reveals that royalism has hardly guaranteed authoritarian perpetuity; since the 1950s, just as many Arab monarchies have fallen as have survived. Cultural arguments recycle old Orientalist logic, are patently unfalsifiable, and ignore the historical reality that powerful ruling monarchies owe much of their modern power to colonial machinations rather than indigenous forces.

The institutional approach carries more credibility, in that monarchs in liberalized kingdoms such as Morocco and Jordan often outmaneuver opposition by offering limited democratic openings. Yet this functionalist argument restates the unobjectionable adage that autocrats pursue policies to maximize their survival. Royalism presents different institutional options than republicanism, but not all kings adopt them; if they did, no ruling monarchy would collapse. Furthermore, in the Gulf monarchies, dynastic strategies of familial rule prevent royal leaders from making the limited democratic reforms seen in Morocco and Jordan.

Of course, culture and institutions are seminal forces that shape politics in every state. Many autocracies regardless of type appeal to cultural values in order to establish their authenticity. Institutional structures determine access to power and modes of policy making. Yet distanced from such truisms, in an explanatory sense structures have little to do with why eight monarchies have held on to power since the outbreak of the Arab Spring. There is no cultural or institutional DNA that renders royal regimes in states as disparate as Morocco, Oman, and Saudi Arabia impervious to overthrow.

Here, we instead offer a *strategic* explanation for monarchical exceptionalism, one that links the historical legacy of domestic choices with a permissive international environment. First, many of these royal houses have historically mobilized cross-cutting coalitions of popular support, coalitions that have helped to forestall mass opposition and to bolster the ruling family against whatever opposition has emerged. Second, most have also reaped ample rents from oil or foreign aid, allowing them to pay for welfare and development programs meant to alleviate public discord. Finally, when all else fails, these kingdoms have enjoyed the backing of

foreign patrons who assist them through diplomatic assurances, economic grants, and military interventions. For a long time, the United States played this role. The Arab Spring marked new Saudi prominence as guarantor of monarchical order in the Arab world, as Saudi cash aided poorer kingdoms and Saudi troops spearheaded the intervention in Bahrain.

Exploring the persistence of the Arab monarchies provides a stern reminder about comparative analysis: Explanations for regimes of an exceptional type need not abide by essentialist logic suggesting that some innate feature such as cultural inheritance or institutional destiny predetermines long-term outcomes. The prospects for popular revolution in the Arab kingdoms will remain slim so long as their leaders continue to maintain broad-based coalitions, secure access to hydrocarbon rents, and enjoy bountiful support from foreign patrons.

The New Monarchical Exceptionalism

A monarchy is a regime led by a hereditary sovereign who may hold varying degrees of power. Royal houses in the eight Arab monarchies—Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the Persian Gulf littoral states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE—all wield near-absolute power.² None qualifies as a constitutional kingship in which the enthroned incumbent exercises only ceremonial influence while an elected parliamentary government makes policy. Instead, the region's various kings and emirs not only reign but *rule*: They name cabinets, dictate major domestic and foreign policies, control the state's coercive apparatus, and allow parliaments (where these exist) and judiciaries only limited authority.

The persistence of these monarchies runs against the dominant analytical tradition in political science, where such regimes are considered "an anachronism in the modern world of nations."³ The longstanding assumption held ruling monarchies—given their inability to overcome what Samuel Huntington deemed the "King's Dilemma"⁴—to be incompatible with modern political order. In newly independent Arab countries, the thinking went, the centralization of power required for state-building would ironically undercut absolute monarchy by requiring kings to share authority with crucial new groups such as the urban middle class. Kings could yield to the logic of this process and become constitutional monarchs, or they could face violent revolution. Either way, continued absolutism would not be an option.

Outside the Middle East, political development since 1945 seems to have confirmed this prediction. As recently as 2008, the last king of Bhutan gave up his supremacy in favor of parliamentary democracy. Only a handful of absolutist kingships remain outside the Arab world, such as those in Swaziland and Brunei. Mirroring this development, theorists of authoritarianism have largely neglected to study monarchies.

Many studies either fail to include ruling monarchism or else subsume it under broader concepts such as “personalism” or “sultanism.” By the 1990s, specialists of the Persian Gulf region were among the few scholars left who still studied monarchism.

The stability of monarchies during the Arab Spring has so strikingly defied theoretical expectations that many analysts have reversed the decades-long consensus and now contend that inherent cultural and institutional forces make such regimes *more* durable than their republican peers.⁵ The cultural argument holds that Arab monarchs enjoy exceptional legitimacy. Whereas presidents for life, such as Mubarak or Ben Ali, need constantly to manipulate elections and inflate national-security imperatives in order to govern indefinitely, Arab kings, emirs, and sultans command natural authority thanks to Islamic values, tribal mores, and hereditary principles that resonate with their societies.⁶ The Alaouite Crown of Morocco and the Hashemite House of Jordan claim descent from Muhammad himself. The dynastic families ruling Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE command respect among the tribal confederations in their societies. As Saudi sociologist Khalid al-Dakhil contends, this makes monarchies “closer to the society they govern” than republics, for their traditions produce reverence and support from Arab subjects wooed by such powerful cultural appeals.⁷

Resilient royalism also stems from institutional structure. Monarchism deliberately positions Arab kings and emirs above the fray of everyday politics, since their power cannot be contested through elections. Thus, say some scholars, monarchs can initiate economic and political reforms in response to popular pressure with fewer constraints than republican dictators encumbered by the interests of ruling parties, military councils, and other auxiliary organizations.⁸ By appealing directly to the masses, kings can calm opposition and prevent further unrest with promises of change. Further, the Gulf royals’ practice of putting kin in key posts⁹ enhances regime unity by preventing elite defections and surrounding the ruler with loyal cousins, brothers, and uncles.

These arguments do not hold up under close examination. History shows that the “inherent” qualities of Arab monarchism are hardly safeguards against deposition. In the postcolonial era, monarchies have been overthrown in Egypt (1952), Tunisia (1957), Iraq (1958), North Yemen (1962), South Arabia (1967),¹⁰ and Libya (1969). If we include Muslim (albeit non-Arab) countries in Southwest Asia, then Afghanistan (1973) and Iran (1979) join the list. If royal authoritarianism has intrinsic cultural legitimacy, how could so many Arab kings have lost their thrones? If kings by nature wisely handle opposition with visionary reforms through institutional manipulation, then why did so many fail to do so?

These explanations are also vulnerable to more precise critiques. Cultural-legitimacy arguments repeat the longstanding stereotype that Arabs, due to Islamic identity or tribal heritage, are predisposed to em-

brace despotism. Even disregarding that many Arabs are neither Muslim nor of tribal descent, this presumption ignores the transition of Muslim and tribal societies elsewhere—in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, for example—from ruling monarchism to more democratic forms of government.

Likewise, no evidence suggests that Arab citizens see hereditary succession as the key to authenticity. Of the five presidents challenged by large-scale uprisings recently, three (Mubarak in Egypt, Qadhafi in Libya, and Saleh in Yemen) had drawn widespread condemnation for trying to groom their sons to rule, while a fourth (Syria's Bashar al-Assad) is deprecated by many in his country for having received his office from his late father.¹¹ Moreover, few in any of these states now demand a return to monarchy of any kind.

We cannot reason from the absence of revolution to the presence of legitimacy, for by this measure *any and every* regime must be legitimate unless overthrown. Even if we take legitimacy broadly to mean the absence of regime-threatening revolt, many of today's Arab monarchies have already failed the test. Sultan Said bin Taimur of Oman suffered regional rebellions during the 1960s; King Hussein of Jordan endured civil war in 1970; and King Hassan II of Morocco escaped a military coup in 1972. These regimes persist because they survived close calls with destruction—not because they never faced such threats in the first place.

Finally, the near-absolute power wielded by Arab royals originates not from some ancient cultural essence but from modern colonialism, which turned weak and fragmented claims of dynastic authority into centralized autocracies.¹² Most of the Gulf region's royal families, including the al-Khalifas of Bahrain and the al-Sabahs of Kuwait, indeed have tribal origins. But they could not impose their will on rival tribes and clans until Britain formalized their respective claims to rule through defense treaties in the late nineteenth century, and later helped to put down internal resistance. Likewise, the Hashemites arrived in Jordan from the Arabian Peninsula at the behest of the British Colonial Office after World War I. Only after a decade of social conflict and British support did local Bedouin confederations begin grudgingly to obey their foreign king. The Alaouites may have claimed Morocco's throne in the seventeenth century, but regional revolts challenged them till French-colonial troops crushed all rivals in the early twentieth century.

Capacity and Will

Similarly, the institutional explanation for monarchical stability runs into empirical roadblocks. First, it is true that ruling monarchs are not elected politicians like presidents or prime ministers, and their uncontested authority allows them to impose economic and political reforms from above to assuage opposition groups and the wider public.¹³ Yet the

institutional *capacity* to reform does not always result in the *will* to reform. Kings pursue policies that they hope will keep them in power, but so do all authoritarians. Whether royal rulers facing popular discontent choose reform and dialogue over coercion and closure hinges on contingencies such as leaders' inclinations, historical circumstances, and economic conditions.

King Mohammed VI of Morocco and King Abdullah II of Jordan have reacted to growing unrest with political-liberalization initiatives that have satisfied some opposition demands and helped to stanch protests. While in no rush to democratize, by mid-2011 these monarchs had offered their respective peoples constitutional amendments, new cabinets, and at least the promise of fresh parliamentary elections. King Hamad of Bahrain might have chosen such a path, but instead he reacted more harshly. After briefly tolerating demonstrations in early 2011, he violently quashed them with help from GCC military forces that came rumbling over the 25-kilometer King Fahd Causeway linking Bahrain to Saudi Arabia.

This Bahraini example introduces a final critique regarding institutions: The practice of dynasticism can have serious destabilizing consequences. In the Gulf, because these ruling houses have many branches, monarchs are flanked by relatives who fill top spots in the bureaucracy, the security forces, and the economy. Meant to seal regime unity, this strategy diminishes prospects for political reform by trapping the monarch between the interests of relatives and popular pressures for change.

Bahrain demonstrates how dynasticism can reduce the monarch's freedom of action. Among the major opposition petitions in early 2011 was a call for King Hamad to appoint a new cabinet. Yet powerful hard-line relatives such as his prime minister and military chief rejected such concessions. Their resistance escalated tensions with the burgeoning opposition and convinced some protesters to target the monarchy itself.

Kuwait's al-Sabah dynasty has also struggled with this problem. Since 2006, an unruly legislature and contentious civil society have compelled the emir to dissolve his appointed government (dominated by his al-Sabah relations) no fewer than ten times and to hold new legislative elections five times—a stop-and-start cycle of street protests and royal concessions that continued during the Arab Spring. Allowing parliament to name a commoner as prime minister, instead of the current practice of the emir appointing a relative, would satisfy a wide swath of democratic activists. But the emir cannot overcome fierce opposition to such a step within the royal family. Even lesser moves, such as enhancing public transparency, would financially harm untold numbers of al-Sabah relatives. Here, as elsewhere in the Gulf, the same blood ties that unite a regime around a monarch now form a serious obstacle to reform.

If not culture and institutions, then what explains the exceptional persistence of monarchism during the Arab Spring? The hallmark image of the turbulent period from December 2010 through late 2012 has

**TABLE 1—UNREST IN THE ARAB WORLD
(DECEMBER 2010–AUGUST 2012)**

	Little or no protest mobilization	Significant protests but moderate demands	Mass protests and radical demands
Monarchical states	Qatar United Arab Emirates Saudi Arabia Oman	Morocco Jordan Kuwait	Bahrain
Republican states	Palestine	Algeria Iraq Lebanon Sudan	Tunisia Egypt Libya Yemen Syria

been the popular protests, demonstrations, and other contentious acts by everyday citizens that defy state authority and symbolize demands for political change. The Arab kingdoms experienced remarkable variation in the size and scope of opposition, which underscores a crucial point: The persistence of eight royal autocracies through the Arab Spring says little about *how* each managed to survive.

Table 1 reveals the extent of this variation. Four of the eight kingdoms experienced only negligible levels of protest mobilization. Dissent remained mild in Qatar and the UAE, though a handful of writers, bloggers, and thinkers criticized royal governance. In Saudi Arabia, Shias rioted while youth activists and advocates of women's rights became more vocal. Likewise, Oman saw unexpected demonstrations by frustrated workers. Yet these were small-scale events that did not seriously threaten these regimes.

In Morocco, Jordan, and Kuwait, larger numbers took to the streets in favor of economic and political change. In the former two, youth-led grassroots movements hit a ceiling within months of the first demonstrations. They failed to attract a critical mass of public support, and, more important, they moderated their demands, focusing on *how* their kings should govern rather than *whether* they should rule in the first place. Kuwait also saw boisterous rallies, but these reflected a vibrant tradition of civic dissent that pre-dates the Arab Spring. These protests did not break new ground and quickly pivoted to old issues such as tribal rivalries, citizenship rights, and political corruption—longstanding problems that did not threaten the al-Sabah dynasty.

By contrast, Bahrain experienced near-revolution. Its opposition trend was massive in size, cross-sectarian (at least at its outset), and existentially threatening to the regime. At the height of the unrest in February 2011, well over a hundred-thousand Bahrainis marched in protest, an astonishing number given the tiny island country's citizen population of less than 570,000.¹⁴ If Charles Kurzman's estimate that modern revolutions seldom involve more than 1 percent of the population is true, then what transpired was proportionally one of the greatest shows of "people

power” in modern history.¹⁵ Although most Bahrainis desired constitutional reforms, a vocal and growing faction called for the overthrow of the staunchly Sunni monarchy as repression intensified. Furthermore, to the surprise of many observers, protesters came not only from the long-suffering Shia majority but also from the stereotypically loyal Sunni minority. The perceived threat was so dire that in March 2011 the GCC, led by Saudi Arabia, sent about 1,500 soldiers and police officers to the island. Thus reinforced, the monarchy launched a full-scale crackdown.

Comparing these patterns of protest mobilization suggests a comprehensive new explanation for monarchical exceptionalism. First, most of the monarchies rested upon *cross-cutting coalitions*—that is, historical alliances linking different social constituencies to the ruling family. Broad-based coalitions are the hallmark of successful autocracies regardless of institutional structure. Whether they rule upon a throne, command a mass political party, or sit amongst military generals, dictators cannot rule through repression alone; they need supporters who will not only validate regime policies but also counter opponents during crises. Because regime supporters’ prosperity and status typically depend on the regime’s survival, the payoff of authoritarian continuity remains significantly higher than the “payoff” of revolutionary turnover. This helps to explain why antiregime protests failed to spread in many parts of the Gulf and also why popular movements in Morocco and Jordan failed to secure allies. While these publics desire reform, key elements within them have little faith that any new order can provide the same benefits and protections as their imperfect ruling families.

In the 1960s, Morocco’s monarchy began using economic payments, policy guarantees, and nationalist appeals to secure the interests of the business class, agricultural elites, and religious authorities. Such partnerships helped the Alaouites to weather this period of postcolonial unrest. In Jordan, the Hashemites expanded the public sector in order to marginalize the Palestinian majority while incorporating tribal communities, the Christian minority, and other settled groups into the state after the politically tumultuous 1950s. Palestinian businessmen later became part of this authoritarian contract, receiving economic largesse in return for political acquiescence.

Similar balancing acts abound in the Gulf, with the distinction that the large ruling families of these kingdoms, due to their monopoly over oil money and state power, assume a leading social role with other partners.¹⁶ For example, Saudi autocracy revolves around an alliance between the al-Saud family, the conservative Wahhabi Islamic establishment, and regional business captains. These partnerships created the modern Saudi state by unifying disparate regions. In Kuwait, the al-Sabahs gave political voice to wealthier Sunni merchant clans, the settled Shia minority, and tribal communities after the 1930s. Having nearly lost power against a concerted legislative revolt in 1938, it sought to protect itself from

future domestic unrest by striking popular compromises that today still characterize the social foundations of the modern Kuwaiti state.

If rallying diverse coalitions of support is the winning strategy, then why do all authoritarians not do it? One answer lies in the historical circumstance of state-building. In historical perspective, many state-builders in the developing world mobilized cross-cutting coalitions when they faced intense widespread opposition but lacked the coercive resources needed to consolidate power.¹⁷ Unable to conquer resistance from below, they were forced to compromise with social forces instead—nascent bargains that helped guarantee future support in return for economic or political sacrifices. In Southeast Asia, for instance, the Suharto dictatorship of Indonesia lasted for decades, and the UMNO-dominated regime of Malaysia still persists today, partly because they struck early alliances with key constituencies like student movements, urban businessmen, and ethnic elites that years later helped them weather periods of unrest.¹⁸

Most of the monarchies in the Arab world today confronted social conflict early in the postcolonial era and thus rallied the coalitional pillars for their royal autocracies to survive. By contrast, overthrown kingships like those in Egypt, Iraq, and Libya could have mobilized broad social bases to anchor their absolutism but felt little need to do so—either because they did not face those early struggles or because they thought that they enjoyed enough external support to suppress them. As a result, they lacked defenders when challenged by left-wing oppositionists and restive military officers.

The same pattern can be seen in Bahrain today. The Sunni-Shia sectarian division runs deep, but it does not predestine conflict. A quarter of Kuwait's national population is Shia, yet they remain among the staunchest supporters of that Sunni regime. The al-Khalifa dynasty, however, never felt *threatened* enough to reach beyond its Sunni-minority base and forge new alliances with the Shia majority, the same demographic that authored uprisings in the 1990s and most recently during the Arab Spring. The al-Khalifas faced severe worker riots and Shia protests in the 1950s, but British intervention squashed the unrest and restored their authority. Exposing the regime to potential overthrow might have encouraged it to reach across the sectarian aisle merely in order to survive; instead, it felt secure enough without such coalitional sacrifices.

The Cost of Coalitions

Coalitions do not maintain themselves. Autocrats must constantly nurture their alliances with material patronage. Ben Ali and Mubarak, for instance, both inherited dominant ruling parties that housed broad coalitions. That mass support that they enjoyed in the 1980s when they assumed power dwindled over the years, yet they did not realize how few groups still backed their rule in 2011. In these cases, the social founda-

tions of authoritarianism withered from cronyism and were compounded by economic neglect and scarce resources. Libya, Syria, and Yemen all suffered from inadequate development and widespread poverty; even Egypt and Tunisia, both middle-income countries, suffered from high unemployment, particularly among young university graduates.

By contrast, most of the Arab monarchies have access to *hydrocarbon rents* and thus material inducements for their supporters. Most of the Gulf kingdoms possess enormous proven oil and gas reserves that provide revenue for public-payroll jobs, welfare payouts, and state contracts that have long made social forces dependent upon the regime.¹⁹ More important, after watching oil-rich monarchies such as Iran's fall to revolutions in the past, today's kings and emirs grasp that, rather than hoarding wealth (as Qadhafi did), they must strategically disperse their hydrocarbon windfalls in order to satisfy social allies. Corruption may run rampant in these states, but so too do coalitional payments: Loyalty has a price, and everyone knows this.²⁰

Hence, when grassroots protests began spreading across the region in early 2011, the wealthiest monarchies reacted quickly. Kuwait announced a US\$5 billion domestic program that provided \$3,500 in cash to every citizen along with free foodstuffs for a year; the Saudi monarchy committed \$130 billion to job creation, salary increases, and development projects; and Qatar announced massive pay and benefit hikes for public servants and military personnel. This *rentier* logic is not confined to royal autocracies. Oil-rich Algeria, too, ramped up spending on salaries, housing, and other public services, and succeeded in stemming strife with targeted social spending borrowed from the Gulf-state playbook.²¹ Thus, while hydrocarbon rents remain crucial to political stability in many monarchies, regime type has little to do with this endowment: The Arabian Peninsula happens to sit atop massive hydrocarbon reserves, and on that landmass reside six Arab monarchies today. Put another way, had Hosni Mubarak suddenly discovered \$100 billion in oil wealth when underemployed Egyptians began congregating in Tahrir Square, he may well have weathered the storm.²²

Of course, not every Arab monarchy floats on a sea of petrochemical riches. Bahrain, for instance, is fast depleting its oil reservoirs, and Jordan and Morocco have virtually no oil or gas resources while laboring under sizeable foreign debts. Yet oil rents easily recirculate across borders in the form of aid. By the end of the first quarter of 2011, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE—the four wealthiest kingdoms—had announced generous new economic-assistance packages for poorer monarchies. Transforming the GCC from an alliance organized around external security into one focused on domestic stability, these states pledged \$20 billion to a fund to help stabilize fellow GCC members Bahrain and Oman, and then offered Jordan and Morocco access to a \$5 billion pot of aid should they choose to join the organization.

In effect, these external bounties will allow these regimes to behave *as if* they had oil wealth, even in an era of global downturn and financial austerity. Jordan and Oman, for instance, reacted to demonstrations by expanding public employment and costly price subsidies, policies made possible by the promise of oil-fueled GCC assistance. Had Saudi Arabia not delivered its first \$1.4 billion to Jordan in August 2011, the latter would have had to declare a record budget deficit.

Finally, when all else fails, the Arab monarchies can call upon powerful *foreign patrons* to furnish diplomatic, economic, and military support during crises. Washington has consistently championed the Jordanian monarchy since early in the Cold War, when the Hashemite regime adopted pro-Western foreign-policy positions, and still regards the kingdom as one of its closest Middle Eastern allies. The Alaouite autocracy in Morocco has received support from both the United States and France, the latter of which has longstanding linguistic, cultural, and trade ties with the country. Following the British withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971, Washington gradually assumed the mantle of guarantor for Saudi Arabia and the oil-rich littoral. In return, the Gulf kingdoms have cooperated with U.S. strategic interests while keeping energy production high. Bahrain hosts the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet while major U.S. bases sit in Qatar, Oman, the UAE, and Kuwait. Saudi forces also cooperate with the U.S. military. More recently, and especially during the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia has emerged as a regional patron of its smaller neighboring kingdoms.

The Consequences of Unwavering Support

Unwavering support from abroad exerts two major effects. First, it lowers the cost of repression by diminishing any international backlash it might arouse. For example, the United States barely criticized Bahrain's brutal crackdown, noting human-rights protests but ultimately accepting the al-Khalifa monarchy's hard-line stance against opposition forces. Absent external pressure, the al-Khalifa regime chose to eviscerate its opposition because it could *afford* to do so—unlike, say, Qadhafi, whose actions drew international intervention, and arguably Mubarak, who received inconsistent U.S. support throughout the crisis that toppled him. The surety of U.S. diplomatic backing holds true for Saudi Arabia and the other kingdoms: Regardless of the scale of protest, the U.S. position during the Arab Spring was to favor incremental reform over revolutionary transition. Likewise, at the height of the Moroccan protests, France pushed for no political change in its former protectorate, particularly after watching the end of the Ben Ali regime in Francophone Tunisia.

Second, foreign patrons can arm local regimes with additional economic and coercive resources. The well-documented U.S.-Jordanian relationship provides an exemplary case, as Amman has reaped close to

\$12 billion in fiscal payments and military subsidies from Washington over the past several decades, making this kingdom one of the highest per capita recipients of U.S. aid in the world.²³ Although Egypt under Mubarak received nearly five times more U.S. aid than did Jordan, that country received more aid per capita. Aid to Egypt, moreover, mostly took the form of military assistance that satisfied generals hungry for the latest weaponry but did not offset domestic expenditures.

By contrast, more than half of Jordan's annual \$660 million aid package consists of cash grants and other economic support designed to stave off fiscal collapse. In addition, Jordan's aid usually grows thanks to Congressional supplemental funding; in 2011, Congress affirmed that, given Jordan's strategic value, such support will remain steady despite domestic pressure to slash foreign aid. In turn, the Hashemite regime continues to integrate this patronage into its domestic coalitional formula by underwriting public-sector employment and state investments that satisfy its mostly non-Palestinian base. Recently, U.S. assistance has been dwarfed by new GCC aid pledges, which have padded the treasuries of Jordan and other poorer kingdoms during the Arab Spring. The \$20 billion Gulf "Marshall Plan," for instance, is three times the size of Bahrain's entire budget last year. As both Bahrain and Oman are running deficits, such external patronage will support the strategies of coalitional maintenance that have kept fellow monarchies afloat.

When all else fails, foreign patrons can intervene by force. Two formal military interventions punctuated the Arab Spring: In Libya, Western firepower (mostly delivered from the air) helped to destroy the Qadhafi regime, while GCC troops helped to restore the al-Khalifas' sway over the streets of Bahrain. Fearing unrest in its own Shia communities near Bahrain as well as the possibility that sectarian turmoil might undermine fellow Sunni Arab monarchies, Saudi Arabia headed the armed GCC force that rolled into Manama in March 2011, just weeks after nearly a fifth of Bahrain's citizens had joined protest marches. The presence of these troops not only deterred new protests but also enabled Bahraini security forces to focus on targeted raids and arrests of leading dissidents. Today the regime believes itself well guarded against future strife, which helps to explain its continuing resistance to major political reform.

Table 2 below details the cross-cutting coalitions, hydrocarbon wealth, and foreign patrons that distinguish the Arab monarchies. These are the real roots of their exceptionalism—not inherent qualities of royalism, Arab culture, or Islam, but deliberate regime strategies pursued amid fortuitous geographic and other circumstances. Not all kingdoms possess all three factors, but each possesses at least two—and that is analytically sufficient to account for their persistence up to and through the Arab Spring. Possessing only one would make any of these monarchies far more vulnerable to unrest and instability.

For instance, Qatar's al-Thani dynasty never needed to marshal a

TABLE 2—COALITIONS, OIL, AND GEOPOLITICS

	Cross-cutting Coalition	Hydrocarbon Rents	Foreign Patron
Morocco	Yes (business class, religious authorities, agricultural elites)	None (but offered GCC economic aid)	Yes (U.S., France)
Jordan	Yes (East Bank minorities, Palestinian business, tribal communities)	None (but offered GCC economic aid)	Yes (U.S., Saudi Arabia)
Saudi Arabia	Yes (ruling family, regional business elites, religious establishment)	High	Yes (U.S.)
Kuwait	Yes (ruling family, Sunni merchants, Shi'a minority, tribal communities)	High	Yes (U.S.)
Bahrain	No (ruling family, Sunni minority)	Moderate (but offered GCC economic aid)	Yes (Saudi Arabia)
Qatar	No (not necessary due to small homogenous population)	High	Yes (U.S.)
UAE	Yes (seven ruling families)	High	Yes (U.S., Saudi Arabia)
Oman	Yes (ruling family, regional elites from Muscat, Inner Oman, and Dhufar; tribal communities)	Moderate (but offered GCC economic aid)	Yes (U.S., Saudi Arabia)

cross-cutting coalition because it seldom faced threatening conflicts within its small homogeneous community. Even so, well-distributed oil wealth effectively negates material grievances for many Qataris. Further, U.S. support for the regime's authoritarian orientation remains steady for geopolitical reasons: Qatar hosts a large U.S. airbase and adopts foreign-policy positions that enhance U.S. interests, such as backing the Western intervention in Libya. An energy-poor Qatar would be unpredictable because it would expose the al-Thani regime to something that it has not faced for half a century—a disgruntled citizenry that lacks political rights *as well as* viable jobs, living wages, and adequate services. Similarly, Jordan lacks hydrocarbon riches, but the Hashemite House has a social base and resolute U.S. and Saudi promises of support. Without that external patronage, the regime would have to face the reality that it cannot afford to maintain its coalition alone.

The monarchical exceptionalism that characterized the Arab Spring surprised many observers who had long assumed that the era of absolute monarchy had passed. Yet what makes these regimes persist, especially in a climate of regional tumult and political contention, is not cultural traditions and institutional structures but rather a set of three overlapping factors—cross-cutting coalitions, hydrocarbon rents, and foreign patron-

age. Collectively, these realities explain why half these royal autocracies never confronted widespread protests, why many popular protests ultimately moderated and dissipated, and finally why in the one case where the masses did mobilize for change, the regime nonetheless survived.

Several implications flow from this. First, these kingdoms remain highly vulnerable to exogenous shocks, such as fluctuations in global energy prices and the geopolitical preferences of outside powers. While most retain domestic support from a diverse array of social forces, that coalitional backing will weaken if these regimes no longer have vast sums of oil or aid money to funnel to these internal allies. Likewise, should Saudi Arabia ever decide to abandon its patronage of Bahrain—an admittedly unlikely scenario—the al-Khalifa regime may struggle to suppress its next uprising.

Second, on an analytical level, students of democracy and authoritarianism must exercise caution when addressing outcomes for regimes of an uncommon type. Ruling monarchism flourishes in the Arab world, but the reasons for this do not stem from any mysterious essence of kingship. They stem, rather, from historical choices and physical resources amenable to matter-of-fact analysis. To be sure, culture and institutions are central forces in the politics of any state. Yet they do not constitute convincing explanations for the resilience of royalism in the Arab world.

NOTES

The authors wish to thank Hicham Ben Abdallah El Alaoui and fellow participants at the May 2011 Arab Spring Exploratory Conference for their comments.

1. See, for example, Brian Whitaker, “God Save the Arab Kings?” *Guardian*, 27 April 2011.

2. If we disaggregate the federal UAE into its seven constituent parts, then effectively there are *fourteen* royal families in the Arab world with legally recognized claims over some territory.

3. Michael Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 166; and Manfred Halpern, *The Politics of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 42.

4. Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 177–91.

5. Jean-Pierre Filiu, *The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), and Marina Ottaway and Marwan Muasher, *Arab Monarchies: Chance for Reform, Yet Unmet* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011).

6. Bernard Lewis, “Monarchy in the Middle East,” in Joseph Kostiner, ed., *Middle East Monarchies: The Challenge of Modernity* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000).

7. Khalid al-Dakhil, “Mawqi’ al-malakiyyat wa al-jumhuriyyat fi al-mashhad” [The situation of the kingdom and the republic in perspective], *Al-Hayat*, 26 June 2011.

8. Russell Lucas, "Monarchical Authoritarianism: Survival and Political Liberalization in a Middle Eastern Regime Type," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 36 (February 2004): 103–19; Michael Herb, "Princes and Parliaments in the Arab World," *Middle East Journal* 58 (July 2004): 367–84.

9. Michael Herb, *All in the Family: Revolution, Absolutism and Democracy in Middle East Monarchies* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999).

10. The Federation of South Arabia, now the southern part of Yemen, was a British-constructed collection of sheikhdoms and sultanates surrounding the Crown colony of Aden. It resembled the UAE but without oil. It did not survive Britain's withdrawal from its territory in 1967.

11. Dina Shehata, "The Fall of the Pharaoh: How Hosni Mubarak's Regime Came to an End," *Foreign Affairs* 90 (May–June 2011): 26–32.

12. Lisa Anderson, "Absolutism and the Resilience of Monarchy in the Middle East," *Political Science Quarterly* 106 (Spring 1991): 1–15.

13. Ottaway and Muasher, *Arab Monarchies*, 21.

14. The 2010 Bahraini census reported a citizen population of 568,399 out of a total population of 1,234,571, but the remainder consisted of foreign residents who did not participate in the 2011 protests. Sharon Otterman and J. David Goodman, "Hundreds of Thousands Protest Across the Middle East," *New York Times*, 25 February 2011.

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

16. J.E. Peterson, *The Arab Gulf States: Steps Towards Political Participation* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 16–21.

17. Though applicable to the developing world, the best exposition of this argument comes from American political development. See Martin Shefter, *Political Parties and the State: The American Historical Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 6–7.

18. For more on the bargained nature of durable autocracies in Indonesia and Malaysia, see Benjamin Smith, *Hard Times in the Lands of Plenty: Oil Politics in Iran and Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), and Dan Slater, *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

19. F. Gregory Gause III, *Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1994).

20. Whereas early work on oil politics suggested that *rentier* dependence undermined regime stability, more recent work reveals the opposite: *How* rulers redistribute their fiscal rents matters just as much as *whether* they have access to those rents in the first place. See Smith, *Hard Times in the Land of Plenty*, and Sean L. Yom, "Oil, Coalitions, and Regime Durability: The Origins and Persistence of Popular Rentierism in Kuwait," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 46 (June 2011): 217–41.

21. Lahcen Achy, "Why Did Protests in Algeria Fail To Gain Momentum?" *Foreign Policy*, 31 March 2011.

22. We are grateful to Marc Lynch for this telling counterfactual.

23. For more on this tight relationship, see Sean L. Yom, "Jordan: Ten More Years of Autocracy," *Journal of Democracy* 20 (October 2009): 151–66.