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## Revolt and Resilience in the Arab Kingdoms

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Zoltan Barany

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**ABSTRACT:** The eight Arab kingdoms, aside from Bahrain, have weathered the Arab Spring with remarkable ease when compared to presidential republics. What explains the relatively modest upheaval and the ruling elites' success in preserving the status quo? This article suggests that the popular legitimacy of the region's monarchies complemented by fragmented political opposition and deep social cleavages limited the appeal of radical revolt.

Even a perfunctory survey of the states where the Arab Spring was marked by mass demonstrations and substantial violence—Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Bahrain—reveals that, with the exception of the last, they are all presidential republics. North Africa and the Middle East is also home to eight Arab monarchies, from Morocco on the Atlantic Ocean to the emirates on the Persian Gulf, that have escaped the brunt of the upheaval that rocked the region since early 2011. Why have these states been seemingly immune to major revolts? How have their rulers responded to popular demands for reform? What explains their overall success in preserving the status quo and keeping the agents of radical change at bay?

Seven of the eight Arab monarchies—Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—have managed to stave off the recent turmoil. The eighth, Bahrain, a tiny island off the coast of Saudi Arabia, is the notable exception: it is the only Shi'a-majority population Arab monarchy ruled by a Sunni Muslim royal dynasty and it has experienced considerable unrest. The endurance of the Arab kingdoms is all the more remarkable because only a few decades ago experts entertained serious doubts regarding their long-term survival. After the end of royal rule in Egypt (1952), Iraq (1958), Yemen (1962), and Libya (1969), it *did* seem that the days of the Arab monarchies were numbered. Royal rule was threatened by coup attempts (Saudi Arabia and Morocco) and civil war (Jordan) but the only Middle Eastern monarch unseated in over three decades was not an Arab king but the Shah of Iran.

A number of scholars explored the reasons behind the survival of the Arab monarchies prior to the Arab Spring. These studies explained the monarchies' resilience through their unique historical backgrounds and their success in spreading family members throughout senior posts across governmental and security agencies—a trait that led to widespread revulsion when nonmonarchs in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya tried the same thing.<sup>1</sup> In this context, then, it is tempting to consider the Arab Spring as a major test to the endurance of the Arab world's remaining

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Lisa Anderson, "Absolutism and the Resilience of Monarchy in the Middle East," *Political Science Quarterly* 106, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 1-15; and Michael Herb, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999).

kingdoms, a test that, with the exception of Bahrain, they passed with remarkable ease. How to account for their success not just to survive but, perhaps more importantly, to continue to resist introducing substantial political reform? The challenges to these states, which range from virtually none in the United Arab Emirates to large-scale protests aiming to unseat the regime in Bahrain, were as different as the states themselves.

Four factors that explain the successful management of the political challenges in 2011 pertain to *all* Arab monarchies save for Bahrain. First, protesters in the kingdoms wanted reform and not revolution as in Tunisia or Egypt. Instead of calling for the abolition of the royal regimes, activists sought a shift from absolute to constitutional monarchies. Second, opposition forces in all of these states were largely disorganized and fragmented; consequently, their capacity to offer a clear alternative or to bring about change was heavily compromised. Third, as in other contexts, the fear of widespread disorder that accompanied regime collapse in states like Libya and Yemen reduced the appeal of radical approaches. Lastly, security forces avoided the overreaction seen in several Arab republics and performed their tasks effectively without causing excessive casualties.

Several explanatory variables are unique, however, to the different kingdoms. Most importantly, given their vast financial reserves, the prosperous dynastic monarchies of the Gulf were able to buy social peace with economic incentives and expensive social programs accompanied by minimal, if any, political concessions. In Morocco and Jordan, on the other hand, rulers needed to rely on political skills because their resources were inadequate to purchase sociopolitical tranquility, even if they were financially assisted by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf kingdoms. Both continued their decade-long practice of promising major political reforms while in reality making only modest concessions.

In this article, I first discuss the main thrust of the Arab Spring as experienced in the Gulf and examine how the royal governments reacted to it and why, with special attention to the outlier, Bahrain. In the second section, focus shifts to Morocco and Jordan and why these two states could quickly defuse threats to their political stability and preserve their rule with only minor concessions. My argument is that, while the Gulf kingdoms' stability, given their plentiful financial reserves, appears assured in the foreseeable future, the rulers of Jordan and Morocco need to make real concessions to safeguard their long-term rule.

### **The Arab Spring in the Gulf Kingdoms**

Compared to the full-blown uprisings elsewhere in the Arab world, two of the Gulf Cooperation Council's member states (Qatar and the UAE) were essentially unaffected by turmoil while two others (Oman and Saudi Arabia) faced only minor demonstrations. In Kuwait, however, important political red lines were crossed although they have not shaken the emir's hold on the country. Bahrain, where the Al-Khalifa family's rule has been challenged and threatened, is the outlier.

### **Political Mobilization**

In the richest Gulf state, Qatar, no demonstrations took place at all. A few activists criticized the emir's pro-Western foreign policy but

the main domestic threat remained the long-standing infighting within the several thousand strong Al Thani ruling family. In the UAE, some intellectuals signed a petition demanding free elections to the Federal National Council, the main federal authority of the country. In Oman, small groups of approximately 200 demonstrated, at first mostly in the port city of Sohar but later in the capital, Muscat, as well. Most protesters sought jobs, pay raises, and anticorruption measures but a few called for a new constitution leading to a parliamentary monarchy.<sup>2</sup>

The Arab Spring was rather more eventful in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Both countries have substantial Shi'a Muslim minorities: in Saudi Arabia they make up approximately 10-15 percent of the population (2.8-4.2 million) and 33 percent in the Eastern Province while in Kuwait they number about 800,000 (30 percent).<sup>3</sup> Organizers promised a "Day of Rage" in Saudi Arabia that never materialized due to the extensive deployment of security forces.<sup>4</sup> On numerous occasions in the spring and fall of 2011, in the Eastern Province town of Qatif, several hundred demonstrators called for the end of religious discrimination, the expansion of women's rights, and the lifting of restrictions on freedom of speech.<sup>5</sup> The reduction of unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, was another common demand of demonstrators (39 percent of Saudis between the ages of 20 and 24 are unemployed).<sup>6</sup>

Of the five states considered in this section, only Kuwait can be said to have anything resembling an organized opposition. The ruling Al Sabah family introduced quasi-representative institutions to serve as safety valves for dissent and in the past decade the National Assembly has become a dynamic and occasionally raucous body. It is permitted to "grill" cabinet ministers and, since 2009, has even included female members. As the legislature's political authority gradually increased, the ruling elites have become somewhat more accountable to the citizenry.<sup>7</sup> Starting in February 2011, a number of the country's relatively independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) organized demonstrations to demand political reforms, to dismiss the unpopular prime minister, and to denounce the mismanagement of public funds and growing income inequalities.

Elsewhere in the Gulf states, opposition groups, if they exist at all, have no coordination and are divided over several fundamental issues, starting with the concessions they expect from the state. Most importantly, demonstrators did not call into question the kingdoms' basic political and economic arrangements. Instead, they sought political

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2 David Sorenson, "Transitions in the Arab World: Spring or Fall?" *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 24; and Marc Valeri, "Oman," in *Power and Politics in the Persian Gulf Monarchies*, ed. Christopher Davidson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 58.

3 Joshua Teitelbaum, "The Shiites of Saudi Arabia," *Current Trends in Islamic Ideology* 10 (August 2010): 73 (also available at [www.hudson.org](http://www.hudson.org)).

4 Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Saudi Arabia," in *Power and Politics in the Persian Gulf Monarchies*, 86.

5 Marina Ottaway and Marwan Muasher, "Arab Monarchies: Chance for Reform, Yet Unmet," *The Carnegie Papers—Middle East* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 2011), 16.

6 F. Gregory Gause III, *Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, Special Report # 63, December 2011), 7.

7 See Michael Herb, "A Nation of Bureaucrats: Political Participation and Economic Diversification in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41, no. 3 (2009): 375-395.

changes such as electoral reform; an independent judiciary; guarantees of freedom of expression; removal of corrupt cabinet members; and some economic concessions. The demonstrations were small, peaceful, and nonconfrontational.

### State Responses

Even though the protests signified only modest domestic challenges to the dynastic monarchies, their governments left nothing to chance. The most widely used approach was to buy social peace through awarding cash bonuses, lowering food prices, creating jobs, and providing housing. The sovereign wealth funds of these rentier states allowed them to make major concessions to their populations, an option not available to their less fortunate fellow rulers in Morocco and Jordan

In Kuwait, every citizen received \$3,500 in February 2011 and the emir announced basic food items would be free until March 2012.<sup>8</sup> The government approved a record budget of \$70 billion, most of which was set aside for fuel subsidies and salary increases for public employees, including military personnel.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, demonstrations continued and, in November 2011, culminated in the storming of the National Assembly building by demonstrators and some members of parliament. Later that month the emir accepted the resignation of the much-criticized prime minister, Sheikh Nasser Al-Sabah, and his cabinet, thereby satisfying one of the key demands of the opposition. Sultan Qaboos of Oman mollified the protesters by concessions such as making several personnel changes in his government, removing corrupt ministers, and introducing unemployment benefits. Bowing to popular pressure, he also announced a number of amendments to the Basic Law.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the limited personnel reshuffle and the token reforms did not address the concentration of near-absolute power around the Sultan nor did they stop the expression of discontent manifested by continuing waves of strikes and unprecedented public criticisms of Sultan Qaboos.

Qatar's rulers made a similar gesture when they announced that in 2013 two-thirds of the seats of its Consultative Assembly will be contested. Other concessions included expanded political rights for women and a constitutional amendment to split the powers of the prime minister from those of the emir—although both of them are senior members of the ruling family.<sup>11</sup> In the relatively calm UAE, the government committed \$1.55 billion to infrastructure improvements and made arrangements with food suppliers to keep prices low. More importantly, the number of eligible voters for the September 2011 Federal National Council elections was raised from 6,000 to nearly 130,000. The barely 28 percent turnout rate seemed to indicate, however, that citizens were “either not interested in political participation or considered the advisory body to be meaningless.”<sup>12</sup>

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8 Lin Noueihed and Alex Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-revolution, and the Making of a New Era* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 250.

9 Liam Stack, “Seeking to Avoid Uprising, Kuwait Escalates Budget,” *The New York Times*, June 30, 2011.

10 Noueihed and Warren, 251; Valeri, 135; and Ottaway and Muasher, 19.

11 Jennifer Lambert, “Political Participation and Reform in Qatar: Participation, Legitimacy, and Security,” *Middle East Policy* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 90.

12 Noueihed and Warren, 251.

In terms of financial enticements, the Saudi government went even further than its neighbors. In February 2011, it took preemptive action, promising to spend \$37 billion on raising civil service salaries, and building low-income housing units even before protests broke out in its troubled Eastern Province. Following demonstrations there, Riyadh earmarked an additional \$93 billion for various socioeconomic projects, including the creation of 60,000 government jobs.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the kingdom announced, starting in 2015, women will be allowed to participate in municipal elections and will be eligible for appointments to the Shura Council, an advisory body to the king.<sup>14</sup>

Besides using the carrot to alleviate tensions, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states also employed the stick when necessary. Regular armed forces were seldom involved in suppressing demonstrations; that task was executed by regular police and security forces. Only in Oman did the need arise to deploy the country's highly professional and restrained military. Police personnel, particularly in the richest Gulf kingdoms, are often composed of citizens of less prosperous Sunni Muslims from Jordan, Yemen, and Pakistan (especially from Balochistan). The police were ordinarily reinforced by various security forces or the equivalent of a National Guard, while the regular armed forces stayed in their barracks. As elsewhere, military personnel in the Gulf kingdoms abhorred the idea of involvement in internal police operations against demonstrators.

The GCC, as the main political and security organization of the oil-rich Arab monarchies, played an active role in responding to upheaval in member states and beyond.<sup>15</sup> The Council promised a \$20 billion aid package to two of the less wealthy member states, Bahrain and Oman, to finance development projects to alleviate social discontent. The GCC's most important activities during the Arab Spring targeted Bahrain and the two nonmember Arab monarchies.

### The Bahrain Exception

The fundamental reason Bahrain has been such an outlier is that the Al Khalifa family lacks any legitimacy with the majority of the country's citizenry. Bahrain is a Sunni Muslim state with a Shi'a Muslim majority population. According to the 2010 census, 56 percent of Bahrain's population are foreigners, while its citizenry is composed of 60 percent Shi'a and 40 percent Sunni Muslims, though most sources put the Shi'a's proportion closer to 70 percent.<sup>16</sup> The ruling elites—the royal family, members of political and business circles, and virtually the entire military-security establishment—are Sunni who have marginalized those of the Shi'a Muslim creed. Many Sunnis believe that the Shi'a are a potential fifth column for Iran that, if given a chance, would replace the state with a Shi'ite theocracy. In Manama, the Bahraini capital, a major

13 Neil MacFarquhar, "In Saudi Arabia, Royal Funds Buy Peace for Now," *The New York Times*, June 8, 2011.

14 Saudi Arabia: Women To Vote, Join Shura Council," *Human Rights Watch*, September 26, 2011.

15 On intra-GCC dynamics, see Matteo Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

16 Steven Cook, "Fear and Loathing in Bahrain," *Council on Foreign Relations blog*, April 28, 2011, <http://blogs.cfr.org>; and for the 70 percent population figure: Foucaut, Elsa. "Consequences of the Political Deadlock in Bahrain on Reforms in the Gulf," *NOREF Report* (Norwegian Peacebuilding Centre, April 2011), 2.

uprising began with a decidedly sectarian character on 13 February 2011. The royal family responded with a \$2,700 grant to every Bahraini family, but this gesture did not stifle the accumulated frustrations and energies of the demonstrators. On 17 February, the regime changed tactics and resorted to violence—security forces used rubber bullets and tear gas on peaceful demonstrators, many asleep at what had become something like a street fair, killing at least four and injuring many.<sup>17</sup> In response, the uprising escalated and took a decidedly antimonarchical character, in spite of King Hamad's offers of dialogue and the government's release of some political prisoners. Some continuing demonstrations were quite large, with over 100,000 people (from a population totaling less than 1 million) participating.<sup>18</sup> The regime, no longer confident of its ability to restore peace, asked for the GCC's assistance which arrived on 14 March, consisting of over 1,500 security troops from Saudi Arabia and the UAE. On the following day, King Hamad declared martial law. The GCC contingent secured strategic locations and buildings while domestic forces suppressed resistance. Following the fierce repression of the protests, however, a growing proportion of the Shi'a community shifted support to radical opposition activists, emblemized by the Coalition of February 14th Youth. Their principal objectives are to liberate Bahrain from Saudi occupation, overthrow the Al Khalifa regime, and let the population choose their own political and economic system.<sup>19</sup>

At least forty-six people died in the conflict, including some police officers. Approximately 3,000 people were arrested, 700 of them were still behind bars at the end of 2011, and over 4,000 lost their job as a result of participating in the conflict.<sup>20</sup> In June, the king lifted the state of emergency and appointed M. Cherif Bassiouni, an independent Arab-American legal expert, to head the newly created Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI). The commission was tasked to investigate the security forces' handling of the protests. BICI's surprisingly candid report, broadcast to the nation in November 2011, charged the regime with violating human rights; using excessive force in breaking up protests; torturing demonstrators in custody; and punishing the Shi'a community collectively.<sup>21</sup> The king promised to consider the report's recommendations and dismissed the head of Bahrain's much criticized National Security Agency, Sheikh Khalifa bin Abdullah, a member of the ruling family. Since then, some lower-level policemen were held responsible but sentences against the uprising's leaders were upheld and only token reforms have been introduced, though the government has signaled substantive changes to come.<sup>22</sup>

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17 Kenneth Katzman, "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy," (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, March 2011), 5.

18 Katja Niethammer, "Calm and Squalls: The Small Gulf Monarchies in the Arab Spring," in *Protest, Revolt, and Regime Change in the Arab World*, ed., Muriel Asseburg, (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2012), 15.

19 Toby Jones, "Bahrain's Revolutionaries Speak: An Exclusive Interview with Bahrain's Coalition of February 14th Youth," *Jadaliyya*, March 22, 2012, [www.jadaliyya.com](http://www.jadaliyya.com).

20 "Arab Spring? That's the Business of Other Countries: Interview with King Hamad of Bahrain," *Der Spiegel*, 13 February 2012, [www.spiegel.de](http://www.spiegel.de).

21 "The King's Risky Move," *The Economist*, November 26, 2011; Toby Jones, "We Know What Happened in Bahrain: Now What?" *SADA Journal* (CEIP), 1 December 2011.

22 See "No Progress, No Peace," *Bahrain Centre for Human Rights* (September 18, 2012); "Turning a New Page in History," *Gulf Daily News*, 13 December 2012; "Bahrain's Top Court Upholds Sentences Against Uprising Leaders," *The New York Times*, January 7, 2013; and author's interviews with opposition activists and regime supporters in Bahrain (December 2012).

There is, of course, an important regional dimension to the turmoil in Bahrain, which is also a proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran.<sup>23</sup> First, the Saudi state has a tremendous influence on Bahrain, which is only accessible on land from Saudi Arabia through the 15-mile-long King Fahd Causeway. Second, the Saudis are understandably worried about the effect of Bahrain's Shi'a uprising on their own large Shi'a minority in their Eastern Province where, incidentally, the bulk of the country's oil deposits are. Third, Shi'a-majority Iran, the Sunni monarchies' arch enemy, has not only been keenly interested in the fate of its religious brethren in Bahrain but Iranian officials have claimed Bahrain as Iran's province in public statements.<sup>24</sup>

### Morocco and Jordan: The Shrewdness of Kings

Not having the financial resources to purchase social peace, King Mohammed VI of Morocco and King Abdullah II of Jordan responded to demands for reform with tactics they have long mastered: manipulation, co-optation, and minor concessions masked as major reforms. They projected willingness to compromise and carefully calibrated the actions of their coercive agencies to avoid the clumsy overreaction of other rulers in the region.

#### *Political Mobilization*

The two countries share a history of regime-tolerated protests, usually occasioned by socioeconomic grievances, starting in the 1990s. The first major Arab Spring demonstration in Morocco took place on 20 February 2011, organized on Facebook by a youth group that called itself February 20th Movement for Change. On that day, 150,000 to 200,000 Moroccans took to the streets in 53 towns and cities across the country.<sup>25</sup> Smaller, mostly uncoordinated, demonstrations continued for months. The protests in Jordan started as, and for the most part remained, sit-ins after the Friday prayers. As in Morocco, individual demonstrations remained relatively small. The largest demonstration occurred 24–25 March and attracted approximately 7,000 to 10,000 people,<sup>26</sup> nothing like the mass rallies in Tunis or Cairo. In fact, according to a Jordanian poll, 80 percent of respondents did not support the protests, 55 percent thought they led to chaos, and 15 percent viewed them as unnecessary and useless.<sup>27</sup>

The participants in the Moroccan demonstrations were mainly young, educated, and urban middle class men and women. The mostly co-opted political parties, with the partial exception of the fringe United Socialist Party (PSU) and the banned Islamist group, Justice and Charity, not only did not participate but actually advised their youth organizations

23 See Simon Mabon, "The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry," *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 84–97.

24 See, for instance, "Bahrain as 'Iran's Fourteenth Province,'" *The Telegraph*, February 17, 2011; for background, see Edward Gordon, "Resolution of the Bahrain Dispute," *American Journal of International Law* 65, no. 3 (July 1971): 560–568.

25 See "Ça ne fait que commencer..." *Tel Quel*, February 26–March 4, 2011, 24–25.

26 Sarah Tobin, "Jordan's Arab Spring: The Middle Class and Anti-Revolution," *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2012), 101.

27 Samuel Helfont and Tally Helfont, "Jordan: Between the Arab Spring and the Gulf Cooperation Council," *Orbis* 56, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 90.



to stay away. Once Justice and Charity became involved, however, the February 20th Movement started to lose momentum because many activists worried the Islamists would hijack the demonstrations.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, following the constitutional referendum and the expedited parliamentary elections, the Movement saw its popularity decline which, in turn, was the main reason Justice and Charity withdrew its support in October 2011.

In Jordan, the demonstrators were urban intellectuals, tribal-based people from the south, and members of the moderate Islamist Action Front (IAF), the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is well integrated into Jordan's political landscape. The deep social divide between Transjordanians and Jordanians of Palestinian origin effectively limited the protests because few Palestinians would join demonstrations that, to a considerable extent, were directed against their ostensibly disproportionately large influence on the state.

The protesters demanded socioeconomic programs and political reforms. Marchers carried signs asking for jobs, effective antipoverty measures, social justice, and condemning rising food and fuel prices, and the endemic corruption in public life. Jordan's King Abdullah II received plenty of criticism: he is considered by many to be far too Westernized and tolerant of the extravagant lifestyle of his Palestinian-born wife and the shady business deals of her relatives.<sup>29</sup> Although no one publicly suggested abolishing the monarchy, many activists in both countries appealed for new electoral laws and elections. Many voiced their desire for a parliamentary monarchy in which "the king reigns but does not rule." Divisions in the opposition ran deep in both countries; ultimately, protesters could agree only on their disapproval of authoritarian rule. Major disputes between incrementalists who were afraid to appear too radical and those who called for rapid and sweeping reforms could not be resolved.<sup>30</sup>

### *State Responses*

There are many similarities in the Moroccan and Jordanian regimes' reaction to the protests. Both states allowed peaceful demonstrations under heavy police presence. When rallies threatened to become too unruly, when the organizers were not known to the authorities, or when the location of the protests was inconvenient—for instance, a demonstration could not be contained to a certain area or it could paralyze a business or government district—both regimes clamped down with security forces and progovernment thugs (*baltagiya*) causing a number of casualties.<sup>31</sup>

Morocco's king quickly realized the protests posed a potentially serious test of his rule and, brilliantly, placed himself at the forefront of reform taking the momentum away from the opposition. Mohammed VI played Morocco's Arab Spring skillfully, staying a step ahead of and outsmarting the opposition at every juncture. In his now-famous 9 March

28 February 20th Movement leaders, interview by author (Rabat and Ifrane), April 2012.

29 See, for instance, Helfont and Helfont, "Jordan," 89.

30 Anouar Boukhars, "The Lesson from Morocco and Jordan: Reform or Perish," *Middle East Institute*, September 1, 2011, [www.mei.edu](http://www.mei.edu).

31 Tobin, "Jordan's Arab Spring," 101-102.

2011 speech, the king, not wanting to alienate politically moderate activists, acknowledged the validity of the protesters' demands. He made several gestures to strategically important groups such as unions, unemployed university graduates, and political parties. The king appointed a constitutional commission headed by one of his advisers and a panel of intermediaries between the constitution's drafters and political parties, nongovernmental organizations, human rights organizations, labor unions, etc. Much of this was just a ploy, however, since no substantive consultation took place.<sup>32</sup>

On 17 June, the monarch introduced the new constitution and announced a national referendum on it only two weeks later. Such a tight schedule made it impossible for the opposition to seriously analyze the draft let alone to organize a public debate on it. In the meantime, the regime unleashed a major media campaign and pressed political parties, imams, and local authorities to urge people to vote and to vote "yes" on the new constitution. The operation succeeded: on 1 July 2011, 73.5 percent of eligible voters went to the polls and, apparently, 98.5 percent of them endorsed the document.<sup>33</sup> The new constitution extends official recognition to the Tamazight language (spoken by the Berber minority), grants citizens access to an independent constitutional court, and requires the monarch to select prime ministers from the members of the party that won the election.<sup>34</sup> Still, the king remains unaccountable to any institution and free of legal constraints on his power. He still heads the armed forces, the constitutional court, and, as Commander of the Faithful, is the spiritual leader of the country's Muslims. In sum, the new constitution, though announced with much fanfare, offered few substantive improvements and made little difference in the fundamental nature of the absolute monarchy. This was a perfect example of top-down constitutionalization.

Jordan's King Abdullah II is less popular and rules a far weaker state than Mohammed VI. He, too, correctly calculated that he could take the sting out of the opposition movement by showing flexibility and promptly addressing the protesters' demands. He promised \$500 million to increase public sector salaries, raised the minimum wage, augmented fuel subsidies, removed unpopular prime ministers (three in fifteen months),<sup>35</sup> met with leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, visited strategically important constituencies, and formed a committee to prepare a new electoral law and to consider constitutional reforms. Moreover, he played to public sentiments by detaining the shamelessly corrupt former chief of the intelligence service.

In June 2011, the team of constitutional experts presented 42 mostly minor changes to the constitution. If anything, there was even less public debate on this constitutional reform than in Morocco. The amendments established a constitutional court, restricted the government's power

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32 Driss Maghraoui, "Constitutional Reforms in Morocco: Between Consensus and Subaltern Politics," *Journal of North African Studies* 16, no. 4 (December 2011): 679-699.

33 "Morocco Approves King Mohammed's Constitutional Reforms," *BBC News Africa*, July 1, 2011, [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk).

34 André Bank, "Jordan and Morocco: Pacification through Constitutional Reform?" in Asseburg, *Protest, Revolt, and Regime Change*, 32.

35 See, for instance, Ranya Kadri and Ethan Bonner, "King of Jordan Dismisses His Cabinet," *The New York Times*, February 1, 2011; Hani Hazaimah, "Khasawneh Resigns; Tarawneh To Form New Gov't," *Jordan Times*, April 27-28, 2012.

to issue temporary laws, limited extrajudicial trials, created an election oversight committee, and restrained the power of the shadowy State Security Court. Other than losing the ability to indefinitely postpone elections, no restrictions were placed on the king's authority.<sup>36</sup>

The long-delayed and much-anticipated electoral law, passed in June 2012, also proved controversial. Although it increased seats in the Chamber of Deputies from 120 to 140 and expanded seats reserved for women from 12 to 15, all members of the Senate continue to be royal appointees. Uniformed personnel of the military-security establishment are allowed to vote for the first time. The opposition roundly decried the new law because it gives every voter two votes, one for a local candidate and one for political parties on a closed proportional representation list. They claim this favors pro-government loyalists as only 17 seats can be contested by party and coalition candidates.<sup>37</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood, by far the most influential opposition movement, announced the Islamic Action Front, its political arm, planned to boycott the elections scheduled for December 2012.<sup>38</sup>

The political concessions, including the constitutional changes and the electoral reforms, did not alter the distribution of political power in the two monarchies in any appreciable way. The lack of truly independent political institutions also means that even if they were interested in substantive changes, the kings would not have any reliable institutional partners with whom to pursue them until they allowed such institutions to develop freely.

### Implications for the United States

For decades now, and particularly since the First Gulf War and 9/11, the Arab monarchies have been reliable allies of the United States; with the passage of time these relationships have become infused with more substance. The kingdoms' for-the-most-part restrained reaction to the recent protests has further confirmed their importance as strategic allies. This is not to say Washington does not have areas of concern with the kingdoms. For instance, Saudi Arabia was sharply critical of US policy that evolved to support the Arab revolutions, in particular the uprising in Egypt. In fact, Riyadh threatened to bankroll the Mubarak administration if Washington withdrew its support and, once the regime in Cairo fell, offered financial aid to the military-led transitional authority, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces.<sup>39</sup> Qatar, on the other hand, took an independent role in shaping the international response to the civil war in Syria and Yemen, urged the Arab League to support the United Nations-sanctioned action against Gaddafi's crumbling regime

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36 Marwan Muasher, "Jordan's Proposed Constitutional Amendments—A First Step in the Right Direction," *Carnegie Endowment Commentary*, August 17, 2011.

37 Kristen Kao, "Jordan's Ongoing Election Law Battle," *SADA Analysis on Arab Reform*, July 5, 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org>.

38 Hend Tarek, "Jordan Opposition Moves To Boycott Elections," *Daily News Egypt*, June 25, 2012.

39 Kamrava, "The Arab Spring," 98-99.

in Libya, and committed its own F-16 aircraft to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-led bombing campaign.<sup>40</sup>

The bottom line is the Arab monarchies, given their political stability (with the notable exception of Bahrain) and the views they share with Washington with regard to the threat of Islamist extremism, remain solid pillars of US foreign policy in a complex and difficult region. One of the ways cooperation between the monarchies and the United States has deepened is through military-to-military contacts, a growing number of joint maneuvers and training courses between elements of the US Central Command and the armies of the Arab monarchies, and an expanding contingent of Arab military officers participating in educational programs in the United States and in other NATO countries, particularly the United Kingdom and France. Senior officers of the Gulf armies confirm the value of such programs and the role it plays in increasing their professionalism.<sup>41</sup>

Bahrain is a special case not only because of its dubious distinction of being the only monarchy with serious domestic security challenges, but also because it has provided a home to the US Navy's Fifth Fleet since 1995. In March 2011, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates visited Manama and held talks with King Hamad and Crown Prince Salman. He urged the Bahraini government to exercise restraint in its response to the demonstrators. Gates and other American politicians have warned that if Manama did not introduce political reforms to diminish the marginalization of the Shi'a community, the ensuing instability might strengthen the appeal of radical opposition groups and create a fertile ground for Iran to interfere and create more chaos.<sup>42</sup> The radicalization of the Bahraini opposition was not inevitable; in large part it was the result of the heavy-handed and uncompromising attitude of ruling elites. American politicians, including Secretary Gates and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, encouraged moderate, gradual political reforms to address the grievances of Bahrain's Shi'a majority.<sup>43</sup>

## Conclusion

Compared to the full-fledged revolutions of several Arab republics, the kingdoms of the region have experienced only mild upheaval. The turmoil has been relatively minor because the monarchies have been able to respond with a mixture of financial incentives, coercive action, and modest political concessions to whatever challenges were posed to them. Furthermore, external diplomatic, financial, and security aid augmented ruling elites' ability to cope with the unrest.

The Gulf monarchies were positioned to counter the mostly feeble challenges they faced with economic incentives. They also made minor

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40 Guido Steinberg, "Qatar and the Arab Spring," *German Institute for International and Security Affairs, SWP Comments 2012/C 07* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, February 2012), 1; interview by author with Arab League officials (Tunis, 3 December 2011) and Elsadig Elfaqi, Secretary General of the Arab Thought Forum (Amman, April 26, 2012).

41 Military officers in Gulf states, interviews by author (December 2012).

42 Miriam Joyce, *Bahrain from the Twentieth Century to the Arab Spring* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 117.

43 Ali Alfoneh, "Between Reform and Revolution: Sheikh Qassim, the Bahraini Shi'a, and Iran," *American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research*, No. 4 (July 12, 2012): 8; author's interview with Bahrain's Ambassador to the United States (Washington, DC, 8 January 2013).

political concessions that posed no risk to their power, and, in the rare cases when it was necessary, forcefully repressed challenges to their authority.<sup>44</sup> It appears, at least in the near-to-medium term, the royal families of the Arabian Peninsula will be able to follow this tactic to maintain their rule: they sit on approximately 46 percent of the world's proven oil reserves and, more crucially, have a production-to-reserve ratio of approximately 90 years.<sup>45</sup>

What about the two resource-poor monarchies? The purchasing-social-peace approach is obviously well beyond their capabilities. In 2011, both Morocco and Jordan managed protests with what seemed like a model of reasonableness.<sup>46</sup> There is, however, a wide gap between the actual political performance of Morocco and Jordan and the mostly positive notice they gather from Western leaders. The political reforms Mohammed VI and Abdullah II offered were not reforms; they were little more than gestures, ploys, and short-term solutions to alleviate social tensions. They are unlikely to change the two countries' political landscape in any meaningful way. Moroccan and Jordanian political elites have taken no real steps to solve the fundamental and long-standing political, social, and economic problems their regimes face: acute rural poverty, rampant corruption, inadequate political rights, and limitations on social mobility, among others.

The big question, then, is just how long can the rule of the Moroccan and Jordanian royal families be sustained without implementing major political, economic, and social reforms. The monarchs in Rabat and Amman are locked in what Samuel Huntington called the "king's dilemma."<sup>47</sup> They must introduce meaningful reforms expeditiously to prevent more dangerous socio-political upheavals in the future, yet that reform process might lead to the collapse of their regimes. Assuming the opposition keeps the pressure up, the best strategy for these two kings is the slow but steady, step-by-step devolution of their absolute power leading to a constitutional monarchy in the next fifteen to twenty years. They are in a much more favorable situation than the Shah of Iran was before promoting his white revolution, or Mikhail Gorbachev at the beginning of glasnost and perestroika. Neither Reza Pahlavi nor Gorbachev enjoyed anything near the sort of deep-rooted domestic support that continues to surround Mohammed and Abdullah. That support, however, will not last indefinitely: "prestige" the great Tunisian thinker Ibn Khaldun warned, "decays inevitably."<sup>48</sup> It needs to be complemented and enriched with real reforms that would grant citizens a stake in the long-term survival of these monarchies.

In the meantime, the United States government should continue to advocate thoughtful and incremental political and economic reforms that contribute to the monarchies' stability and diminishes the appeal of radical political, social, and religious forces and ideas. Military-to-military

44 Niethammer, 16.

45 Legrenzi, 69.

46 Ahmed Benchemsi, "Morocco: Outfoxing the Opposition," *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 1 (January 2012): 57.

47 Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), 177-191.

48 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 105.

contacts, training courses, shared maneuvers, and cooperation in a number of areas have played a beneficial role in the professionalization of the Arab monarchies' officers. One can be confident that maintaining and, if possible, expanding these programs, will be an excellent investment in this region, so crucial for American national interests.

