The Arab Uprisings and International Relations Theory

Introduction

Marc Lynch, *George Washington University*
Curtis R. Ryan, *Appalachian State University*

The Arab uprising of 2010–2011 typically has been told as a series of loosely related national stories, happening simultaneously but successes and failures of which were essentially determined by internal factors. In recent years, political scientists have made great progress in evaluating the success or failure of each country's uprising in terms of country-specific qualities, such as the types of domestic institutions, nature of opposition movements, wise or poor decisions made by leaders, and access to oil revenues (Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds 2015; Lynch 2014). Whereas the comparative-politics literature on the Arab uprisings and their aftermath demonstrates theoretical progress with sophisticated empirical analysis, there has been significantly less theoretical engagement by international relations (IR) theorists. (For exceptions, see Gause 2014; Katz 2014; Lynch 2012, 2014, 2016; Malmvig 2014; Owen 2016; POMEPS 2015, 2016; Ritter 2015; Ryan 2012, 2014, 2015; Salloukh 2013.) The articles in this symposium seek to redress that gap and to advance a productive dialogue between IR theory and Middle East studies.

The Arab uprisings began in transnational diffusion and ended in transnational repression and regional proxy wars. Regional and international factors affected local power balances and the shape of political coalitions. Whereas domestic factors clearly matter most in determining local outcomes, there is not a single case in the Arab uprisings—with perhaps the very partial exception of Tunisia—in which international factors were not important to the outcome. It is remarkably difficult to accurately explain the course of events in Egypt, Yemen, or Libya without reference to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, or Iran. There is a growing literature on IR theory and the Middle East, which has shown the utility of IR theory for understanding regional dynamics but which also has demonstrated the importance—even necessity—of studying the Middle East to create better-informed IR theory (e.g., Barnett 1998; Brand 1994; Fawcett 2013; Gause 2003/4, 2010; Halliday 2005; Hinnebusch 2003; Lynch 1999; Rubin 2014; Ryan 2009; Telhami 1992; Valbjørn and Lawson 2015; Walt 1987). However, with a few notable exceptions, the academic literature on the Arab uprisings is dominated by comparative analysis and country case studies, with IR included as one among several variables—if it is included at all.

It is generally accepted that the uprisings were a region-wide phenomenon. Because of all of the accumulated grievances and internal politics that characterized the situation in each Arab country circa late 2010, it is difficult to conceive of each simultaneously erupting in protest without the highly publicized example of successful uprisings overthrowing long-entrenched dictators in Tunisia and Egypt (Lynch 2012). In the era of social media and Arab satellite television, the Arab uprisings unfolded within a unified political space, with each domestic set of events instantly regionalized and internationalized. Protesters and regimes alike followed events across the region with interest, they took lessons from what was unfolding elsewhere, and they made adjustments in their own strategies and tactics in an effort to effect change—or to thwart it. The international alliances of threatened regimes shaped their capacity to use force against protestors (Ritter 2015). There is now abundant evidence and an increasingly sophisticated theoretical literature describing the diffusion and demonstration mechanisms by which the Arab uprisings spread (Mekouar 2014; POMEPS Studies 2016; Richter and Bank 2016; Tansey, Koehler, and Shmoltz 2016). The initial uprisings, then, clearly cannot be understood without an appreciation of their regional and international dynamics.

The political dynamics of the Arab uprisings and their aftermath crossed levels of analysis with impunity. Domestic upheavals had important consequences for international outcomes, international factors can be seen clearly in domestic outcomes, and transnational forces cut across multiple arenas simultaneously (Owen 2016). Qatar and Turkey each backed Islamist movements competing for power in transitional countries such as Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates backed competing coalitions incorporating members of the old regime, anti-Islamist trends,

business elites, and state actors. The July 3, 2013, military coup that ended Egypt's attempted democratic transition received massive support from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other Gulf states, which allowed the junta to deflect American pressure to reverse the coup. Morocco, Jordan, and Oman received significant Saudi financial assistance to resist popular pressure for change. Bahrain's uprising was crushed violently with the support of Saudi and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) military forces.

States and Russia. The result of these wars has been multiple failed states, tens of millions of refugees and internally displaced persons, and rising sectarianism and extremism.

The Arab uprising's initiation and outcomes, therefore, have been manifestly and profoundly shaped by international factors, with which IR theory has yet to fully engage. Whereas comparative-politics scholarship provides many insights into the Arab uprisings, IR has lagged. To begin rectifying this gap in the literature, the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) teamed with Danish scholar

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Motivated by a combination of opportunity and threat, the Gulf states became especially interventionist in the years following the Arab uprisings. The small, wealthy Gulf regimes enjoyed relative domestic security and commanded assets including money, media empires, and small but well-armed professional militaries that were well suited to the new forms of proxy conflict. At the same time, they feared the rise of Iranian power and clashed with the United States over democracy promotion, the nuclear agreement with Iran, and intervention in Syria (Gause 2014). Transitional situations and civil wars created openings for the Gulf states to cultivate local proxies in order to expand their influence, whether peacefully (i.e., promoting political parties to contest elections or social movements able to command support on the streets) or militarily (i.e., arming local insurgent groups or directly intervening). Qatar and the Arab League pushed successfully for an international military intervention in support of Libya's rebels, which ultimately (with NATO support) toppled the regime of Muammar al-Qaddafi. Yemen's transition was carefully managed by a GCC plan that installed Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi as president in place of the long-ruling President Ali Abdullah Saleh, granting the latter immunity from prosecution. Less-distant neighbors also became heavily involved in domestic conflicts, with Egypt intervening in Libya's civil war and Turkey in Syria's. The Islamic State's offensive erased the border between Iraq's and Syria's conflicts.

These regional proxy wars proved deeply destabilizing. When Yemen's transitional process collapsed following seizure of the capital, Sanaa, by Houthis aligned with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, a Saudi-led military coalition intervened, hoping to quickly restore the deposed president. Instead, the campaign dragged on, becoming a bloody quagmire with devastating results for Yemen—especially in terms of civilian loss of life. Similarly, Libya's failed transition turned into a spiraling civil war that was shaped deeply by external backing for its various rival forces and further complicated by periodic Egyptian air strikes. Syria's uprising had long since transformed into a horrific civil and even regional war, fueled by massive direct and indirect intervention by multiple Arab states, Iran, and Turkey, as well as different degrees of intervention by global powers including the United

Morten Valbjørn of Aarhus University. Their purpose was to bring together nearly two dozen American, European, and Arab IR scholars in May 2015 to discuss connections between IR theory and the Middle East in the new era of Arab uprisings. This diverse group of scholars addressed a wide array of issues raised by reconceptualizing the Arab uprisings in terms of IR. The eight articles in this symposium comprise a small sample of these efforts to link IR theory to Middle East studies, with the idea that each field has much to offer the other.

Each article addresses a different set of issues and concerns in IR theory and Middle East politics. However, together, they also cover a tremendous amount of theoretical and conceptual territory.

Several articles focus on meta-theoretical questions of disciplinary dialogue and the purposes of theory. Morten Valbjørn issues a programmatic call for multiple forms of dialogue across disciplines. He provides three different strategies for achieving cross-fertilization between IR theory and Middle East politics, and he makes clear the gaps not only among these literatures but also among US, European, and Middle Eastern approaches to these topics. Pinar Bilgin investigates the parochialism of IR theory, manifested in its difficulty in incorporating the ways in which non-dominant actors conceive of their own security concerns. Security, she argues, cannot be understood only as a concern of dominant actors in political hierarchies. A more truly global IR theory would break from the Western centrism of much of the field to examine security and politics from the perspectives not only of the powerful but also of "others."

Several articles advance a distinctive theoretical perspective of IR from the point of view of the region. Waleed Hazbun demonstrates the need to incorporate Middle East experiences into IR theory for more meaningful innovation and development. In the wake of the Arab uprisings and amid the throes of ongoing regional wars, he explains the nascent development of a "Beirut school" of security studies. This approach seeks to understand the geopolitics of the Arab world from the inside out and, therefore, from the standpoint of observers who are subject to the instability and violence of the ongoing struggles. Rather than identifying threats to Western interests and how to contain them, this alternative approach

highlights the heterogeneous nature of the security environment composed of diverse state and non-state actors that form an ever-changing multipolar system. Bassel Salloukh exemplifies this approach by highlighting the importance of state weakness in the region. He examines how the proliferation of weak and shattered states has changed the structural dynamics of the region's politics. Given the "persistent permeability" of regional politics, Salloukh argues, even transregional ideologies are used as a power resource.

A third set of articles examines domestic–international linkages from the perspective of the region's startling new patterns. Erin Snider highlights international political economy to show the important effects of domestic–international

Middle East. Ewan Stein focuses on the importance of ideas and ideologies by exploring the relationship between regime legitimization formulas and regional foreign policies. Constructivist scholarship examined identity politics in depth, but Stein argues for bringing back ideology—not to replace identity but rather to refine and add nuance to that category's explanatory power. Ideology, he notes, acts as a key power resource in both domestic politics and foreign policy. He then applies this identity-ideology framework to understanding a vital relationship underpinning much regional turmoil. Specifically, Stein explains how and why Iran continues to support the Syrian regime—even after five years of warfare—with dramatic consequences for the region as a whole.

Taken together, these articles offer a portrait of a new type of IR theory emerging from Middle East studies and the specific experience of the Arab uprisings. From the structural effects of rising-state permeability to the causal power of sectarianism to shifting patterns of economic interdependence, the articles demonstrate the role of distinctive mechanisms in important outcomes.

linkages in regional political outcomes. The Arab uprisings were deeply motivated by economic issues, especially deprivation, inequality, and unaccountable government. However, they also were influenced by international aspects of political economy, such as labor remittances, changing commodity prices, and neoliberal economic policies—which, in turn, were linked to major world powers and international institutions. Like most articles in this symposium, her article underscores the importance of understanding the domestic in the international and the international in the domestic. Sarah Bush examines the different forms of international pressure on the Middle East and the role that Western actors have played in blocking meaningful democratic change. She draws on the classic IR idea of the "Second Image Reversed" to understand the politics of diffusion and convergence in the Middle East. However, Bush also moves beyond this to explain patterns of differentiation and polarization across regional politics. International pressure is usually understood as socializing countries and stabilizing the system, but Bush shows how these international factors can have polarizing and destabilizing effects on domestic politics, with negative consequences for democracy and democratization.

Finally, several articles examine the place of identity and ideology in the new regional-power politics. Gregory Gause explains regional-alliance politics and highlights the ongoing centrality of regime-survival concerns in shaping the foreign policies of Arab states, locating unusual new foreign-policy gambits in the heightened or transformed sense of threats to their rule. Regional politics also defies the expectations of mainstream IR theory, especially regarding alliances and the balance of power. Gause shows why "underbalancing" rather than balancing is a key feature of the post-uprisings Middle East and how "ideological multipolarity" (rather than primordial sectarianism) best explains contemporary IR of the

Taken together, these articles offer a portrait of a new type of IR theory emerging from Middle East studies and the specific experience of the Arab uprisings. From the structural effects of rising-state permeability to the causal power of sectarianism to shifting patterns of economic interdependence, the articles demonstrate the role of distinctive mechanisms in important outcomes. These new approaches should not only inform the comparative-politics literature on the Arab uprisings by illustrating how and why to incorporate international variables. They also should draw general IR theorists into dialogue with the distinctive dynamics of the Middle East. Perhaps most important, to avoid theoretical parochialism, they should demonstrate the urgency of incorporating scholars who are working from within the region. ■

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SYMPOSIUM CONTRIBUTORS

Pinar Bilgin *is professor of international relations and head of the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at Bilkent University, Ankara. She specializes in critical approaches to IR and security. She is the author of* Regional Security in the Middle East: A Critical Perspective *(2005) and* The International in Security, Security in the International *(2016). For further information, see: www.bilkent.edu.tr/~pbilgin. She can be contacted at pbilgin@bilkent.edu.tr.*

Sarah Sunn Bush *is assistant professor of political science at Temple University. Her research focuses on the international sources of domestic politics and the role of non-state actors in international relations. She is the author of* The Taming of Democracy Assistance: Why Democracy Promotion Does Not Confront Dictators *(Cambridge University Press 2015) as well as articles in journals including* International Organization, Journal of Politics, *and* Perspectives on Politics. *She can be reached at sarah.bush@temple.edu.*

F. Gregory Gause, III *is professor and John H. Lindsey '44 Chair in the International Affairs Department of the Bush School of Government and Public Service, Texas A&M University, and head of the department. His most recent book is* The International Relations of the Persian Gulf *(Cambridge University Press, 2010). His work focuses on the domestic politics and international relations of the Middle East, with a particular focus on the Arabian Peninsula/Persian Gulf region. He can be reached at gregory.gause@tamu.edu.*

Waleed Hazbun *is associate professor of international politics at the American University of Beirut and visiting scholar at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at UC Berkeley. He writes on geopolitics and US policy in the Arab world and is developing a book project that explores the global politics of airports and aviation in the Middle East. He is the author of* Beaches, Ruins, Resorts: The Politics of Tourism in the Arab World *(Minnesota, 2008). He may be reached at wh20@aub.edu.lb.*

Marc Lynch *is professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University. He served from 2009–2015 as director of the Institute for Middle East Studies. He is the founder and director of the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) and the author of* The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the Middle *East (2012) and* The New Arab Wars: Anarchy and Uprising in the Middle East *(2016). He may be reached at mlynch@gwu.edu.*

Curtis R. Ryan *is professor of political science at Appalachian State University. He is the author of* Jordan in Transition: From Hussein to Abdullah *(2002) and* Inter-Arab Alliances: Regime Security and Jordanian Foreign Policy *(2009). He may be reached at ryanc@appstate.edu.*

Bassel F. Salloukh *is associate professor of political science at the Lebanese American University, Beirut. His current research looks at post-conflict power-sharing arrangements and the geopolitics of the Middle East after the popular uprisings. His publications include the coauthored* The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon *(Pluto Press, 2015) and* Beyond the Arab Spring: Authoritarianism and Democratization in the Arab World *(Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012). He may be reached at bassel.salloukh@lau.edu.lb*

Erin A. Snider *is an assistant professor of international affairs at Texas A&M University's George H.W. Bush School of Government and Public Service and a Carnegie Fellow at the New America Foundation. Her research focuses on the political economy of aid and development in the Middle East and the politics of Egypt in particular. She may be reached at esnider@tamu.edu.*

Ewan Stein *is a senior lecturer in international relations at the University of Edinburgh. He is currently researching the role of ideologies and social movements in the international relations of the Middle East, is author of* Representing Israel in Modern Egypt: Ideas, Intellectuals and Foreign Policy from Nasser to Mubarak *(IB Tauris) and has published articles in journals such as* Democratization, Review of International Studies, International Studies Quarterly *and the* Survival. *He may be reached at ewan.stein@ed.ac.uk.*

Morten Valbjørn *is an associate professor at the Department of Political Science, Aarhus University, Denmark. He is currently directing an inter-disciplinary research project on sectarian politics in a 'new Middle East' and is, moreover, involved in a project on the role of scholarly identities in the study of identity politics in the Middle East. He may be reached at mortenv@ps.au.dk.*