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# International Politics of Authoritarian Resilience and Breakdown in the Middle East

## *Review Essay*

Brownlee, Jason (2012), *Democracy Prevention: The Politics of the U.S.-Egyptian Alliance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (279 pages, £20.99 paper, ISBN: 9781107677869).

Yom, Sean L. (2016), *From Resilience to Revolution: How Foreign Interventions Destabilize the Middle East*. New York: Columbia University Press (294 pages, £41 cloth, ISBN: 9780231175647).

Ritter, Daniel P. (2015), *The Iron Cage of Liberalism: International Politics and Unarmed Revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (273 pages, £55 cloth, ISBN: 9780199658329).

## **Introduction**

The hope and disappointment that accompanied the 2011 Arab uprisings have demonstrated the centrality of international factors in affecting regime change and shaping transitions in the Middle East and North Africa. Although the impact of international factors on the survival of authoritarian regimes has gained attention in recent years, it remains subject to wide disagreement in both academic and policy circles. Some scholars stress the role of democracy promoters, namely the United States (U.S.) and the European Union (EU), in affecting regime change in regions with entrenched authoritarian regimes, namely in Eastern Europe, Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East. Others have, however, suggested that international policies can protect and embolden autocratic elites through shielding incumbent autocrats from democratizing pressures through diplomatic and economic support. In the Middle East, research has particularly demonstrated that international powers promoted the authoritarian status quo (Jamal 2012; Bush 2015).

Although this debate challenges the traditional schism between the two disciplines of Comparative Politics and International Relations by bridging domestic and international dynamics, research under this theme remains confined to disciplinary boundaries. On the one hand, scholars of IR have looked at the drivers that motivate international actors to promote democracy or support autocracy abroad. Research from this perspective followed an IR-centred approach, where scholars have focused on the policies of democracy or autocracy promoters while paying little attention to domestic politics in target states or the outcome of these foreign policies on other countries.

On the other hand, scholars of Comparative Politics, however, invoked the question of 'What effect does international politics have on the domestic structures of states?' (e.g. Burnell and Schlumberger 2010). This strand refers to what Gourevitch (1978) coins in an

oft-cited article as the ‘second image reversed’. Whereas the international system has been long considered a variable of secondary importance, and sometimes even an irrelevant one, in analysing authoritarian domestic structures, scholars argue that domestic outcomes can derive from the exigencies of the international system. In this context, the international sources of authoritarian resilience and breakdown have been the subject of increased scrutiny. The literature has shown that prospects of authoritarian resilience or breakdown depend in large part on the international context, including the regime’s international alliances, relationship with the superpowers, common membership in international organisations, and cross-border relationships.

Although we know much more about the international sources of domestic outcomes than we did a few years ago, there are remaining questions to be addressed. The theoretical and empirical analyses carried out in the three books under review contribute to this second strand of research by looking at the international as the independent variable in examining domestic outcomes in the Middle East. *Democracy Prevention* explores how the strategic alliance with the United States inhibited democratization processes in Egypt throughout several historical periods. *From Resilience to Revolution* situates the durability of authoritarian regimes in the geopolitical context of state-building processes. *The Iron Cage of Liberalism* shows that through relationships with Western powers authoritarian regimes implement a ‘façade democracy’. Hence, they become prisoners of the liberal political discourse, which ultimately lead to the collapse of these regimes. With great theoretical and empirical rigour, the three books offer divergent, yet complementing causal mechanisms that examine the myriad ways in which international factors shapes domestic outcomes, i.e. persistence or breakdown of authoritarian regimes.

### ***Preventing Democracy***

*Democracy Prevention* is an authoritative account of the Egyptian-U.S. relationship based on thorough review of archival sources and extensive interviews with key figures. It shows how international actors — namely the United States — inhibit democratization and contribute to the durability of authoritarian rule through an elite-based mechanism. The book systematically traces the nature of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, in Egypt in particular beginning in 1973 under President Anwar al-Sadat and continuing through 2012. Brownlee aims to explain why the popular protests were able to unseat a long-standing dictator while facing insurmountable challenges in altering the authoritarian domestic structure, which appeared to be durable and sustainable.

Through five empirical chapters, Brownlee shows that the international dimensions of authoritarianism are elite-centric processes, according to which the United States has contributed the durability of the authoritarian regime in Egypt through several mechanisms. First, the U.S. provided economic aid to support Egypt’s economic infrastructure when people’s economic grievances threatened the regime’s political stability. Second, it has

provided military financing through aid packages to reduce the incentives for any military coup that might destabilize the current regime. Third, the U.S. has supplied the regime with financial capabilities to expand its repressive force and contain any opposition. In short, the U.S. aid aimed at keeping the military loyal and the people quiet.

Chapter 1 presents the U.S. strategy during the post-1973 period. Through authoritarianism and repression, President Sadat was able to conclude the peace treaty with Israel and shift Egypt's international alliance from the Soviet to the U.S. camp. Although this international diplomacy strategy led to the recuperation of the Sinai from Israeli occupation, it was only achieved at the expense of fierce authoritarianism at home in what has been known as the Autumn of Fury when the regime jailed hundreds in 1981. Nevertheless, the United States, under Carter's presidency refrained from criticizing Sadat's repressive and autocratic politics. The Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty and the collaboration with Egypt, especially after the fall of the friendly regime of the shah in Iran, showed that the U.S. sacrificed human rights and democracy promotion agenda for geostrategic interests in the region.

Chapter 2 examines U.S.-Egyptian collaboration under the presidency of Hosni Mubarak during the Cold War and early post-Cold War periods. The nature of collaboration between the two countries developed from strategic reasons to trans-Atlantic intelligence. In the meantime, the Mubarak regime has started cracking down on the opposition (both moderate and radical). Chapter 3 explores how the Bush administration expanded the intelligence cooperation. Although George W. Bush included democracy and human rights in his agenda, the September 11 attacks made the intelligence cooperation with the Mubarak regime invaluable to the U.S. war on terrorism and the war in Iraq. During this period, the White House sustained economic and military support to Egypt not only to strengthen and sustain the regime but also to allow a succession from Mubarak to his son Gamal, a succession that would preserve Egypt's role in the US regional strategy.

Chapter 4 shows how the U.S. made the aid to Egypt conditional upon fulfilling particular tasks eminent to U.S. interests in the region. Following the election of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, the Bush administration demanded the Egyptian military to control the Gaza Strip and prevent attacks on Israeli towns, through destroying underground tunnels. This was the first time that Washington exerted pressure and conditionality to advance U.S. interests in the region. As a result, Mubarak favoured the U.S. strategy over the public opinion, which remained consistently supportive of the Palestinian cause.

Chapter 5 examines the domestic unrest in Egypt and the period that preceded the 2011 Uprisings. Egyptian politics grew more contentious during 2006-2011 as the cultures of protests swept the country. These waves of protests were undertaken by labour movements, and social movements, such as *Kefaya* (Enough). Brownlee shows that the survival of autocrats hardly hinges upon the international support. Egyptian citizens were frustrated with the domestic situation, but also Mubarak's foreign policy favouring U.S.

interests in the region over the public opinion. Nevertheless, Brownlee was rightly cautious against considering such revolution as necessarily leading to regime change. Few years after the ousting of Mubarak, it is undeniable that Egypt's transition to democracy was a failure. In 2013 the military coup that ousted the elected President Mohamed Morsi led to initial strains and tensions between the U.S. and Egypt. Nevertheless, the U.S. strategy of supporting authoritarian regimes in Egypt has proven to be enduring.

*Democracy Prevention* does not, however, explain when and under which conditions international support of authoritarian rule become inefficient. If external support has been essential in increasing Egypt's repressive capabilities, maintaining a loyal military institution, and fending off economic destabilisation, it is unclear why the 2011 Uprisings occurred despite the United States' initial support of the Mubarak regime. In other words, whereas the U.S. were able to pre-empt domestic unrest during the Sadat and Mubarak eras, they were unable to guarantee the survival of the dictator in 2011. At some point, domestic dynamics outlaw the international dimensions of authoritarian support. Yet, the scope conditions for such dynamics remain ambiguous in *Preventing Democracy*. Notwithstanding this small critique, Brownlee presents an intriguing account of U.S.-Egyptian relations and its role in authoritarian durability in Egypt.

### ***Foreign Interventions and Authoritarian State-Building***

Whereas Brownlee situated his argument in the foreign policy goals of the U.S., Yom situates the durability of authoritarian regimes within the geopolitical context of state-building processes in the Middle East. To explain divergent domestic outcomes—revolution, instability, or authoritarian durability—Yom claims that the answer lies in the historical origins of authoritarian state-building. Based on a comparative-historical analysis, the book examines the influence of foreign interventions during the early stages of state-building processes on the persistence of authoritarianism in the Middle East. To summarize the argument in a word, the more the superpowers intervened to support local rulers in repressing opposition movements, the less durable their regime became over time. Regimes that lacked external support were compelled to seek domestic coalitions with different societal groups to ensure regime survival, which led to an inclusive ruling coalition and a wider societal base for the regime. In contrast, the more regimes relied on their external patron for survival, the less they had incentives to bargain with domestic opposition movements. This latter type of regimes is on the path of erosion and collapse over the long term as elites remain in isolation of any societal base.

*From Resilience to Revolution* offers a theoretical framework outlining the interaction between domestic conflict and the geopolitical context of state-building processes. Yom distinguishes three types, corresponding to three empirical cases. The first is what he calls 'geopolitical seclusion', where the lack of access to great powers led ruling elites to broaden their coalitions to survive. Over time, the ruling coalition develops

mechanisms to absorb and contain the opposition, which ultimately guarantees the survival of the regime. This type is illustrated by the case of Kuwait in chapters 3 and 4. During the early periods of state formation, the seminal figure Mubarak al-Sabah attempted to assert his absolute authority but met fierce resistance from the merchant-led opposition. In the meantime, the British power saw little strategic interests to intervene in Kuwaiti domestic affairs to support the ruler of al-Sabah. Lacking the resources and capability to crack down on the opposition, the al-Sabah regime was compelled to bargain and negotiate with the opposition. To strengthen its ruler, al-Sabah aimed to widen its popular base by seeking alliances with other domestic groups. The geopolitical seclusion allowed the evolution of an inclusionary political process, which ultimately produced a durable, yet non-democratic regime in Kuwait.

The second type is the opposite of what happened in Kuwait. 'Geopolitical substitution', where leaders became too reliant on great powers, which led to the rulers' isolation from their societal bases. This type of state building leads to revolutionary outcomes resulting in the regime collapse, and the foreign powers are unable to guarantee its survival. Chapters 5 and 6 explicate this causal pattern through the case of Iran. During the 1940s, the Pahlavi monarchy faced an imminent threat and was nearly overthrown by urban opposition. In 1953, the U.S. intervened through a coup that deposed the elected government of Mohamed Mossadegh and restored the rule of the shah. Following this autocratic restoration, the shah exhibited extreme intolerance towards any political opposition while alienating traditional coalition groups: such as religious, landowning, and commercial elites. By narrowing the ruling coalition and eliminating the societal support for his rule, the shah sowed the seeds of the end of his rule. The geopolitical substitution of the domestic rule in Iran created an opportunity structure, where the Pahlavi regime favoured an exclusionary relationship with societal forces. By detaching the regime from its societal bases, the regime lacked the institutional mechanisms and the societal support to address the demonstrations of 1978 that led to the revolutionary collapse of the regime.

The third type constitutes a middle-range outcome that is long-term survival but instability. This outcome is the result of 'geopolitical subsidisation', that is shaped by the support of international powers. Yet, in societies shaped by ethnic or sectarian divisions, the regime finds total repression costly. Instead, the regime includes a small minority into the ruling coalition while excluding the wider societal base. Jordan, delivered in chapters 7 and 8, is the illustrative case of this type. The 1948 annexation of the West Bank of the Jordan River altered the societal structure and caused the rise of a Palestinian urban opposition, of Arab Nationalist basis to the Hashemite rule in Jordan. In 1957, the U.S. intervened to provide King Hussein with the diplomatic, economic, and military support to regain control. Alongside relying on its Western patron for protection, the regime took advantage of the societal divide: Palestinian and Transjordanian groups. The regime relied on a selective societal bargain with Transjordanian groups by promising them protection from the

Palestinian majority. This strategy of selective exclusion led to the 'tenuous' survival of the regime; that is survival with waves of instability.

The strong evidence and argument presented in *From Resilience to Revolution* make the author's claims about the durability of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East quite compelling. Furthermore, the book shows the benefit of comparative-historical analysis in drawing bigger lessons for recent and timeless questions about the influence of international interventions on authoritarian survival. Although the causal mechanisms are supported with ample evidence and present a parsimonious story, the reader is left with many questions unanswered regarding the generalizability of this theoretical framework. The cases of Iran, Kuwait, and Jordan, are all monarchies with particular historical paths. In this regard, it is unclear the extent to which Yom's argument applies to other cases in the region. Although the case of Egypt, Sadat was supported by the U.S. and grew more exclusionary of the supportive coalition. Yet, the uprisings against him in the late 1970s did not lead to his demise. Moreover, the regime remained stable despite the assassination of the autocrat. It remains unclear the conditions under which the international support of authoritarian rule is ineffective. For example, it is unclear why the U.S. support to restore the shah's regime was successful in 1953 but not in 1978. It is, therefore, imperative to have some scope conditions for the application of this theoretical framework. That being said, Yom's book opens a new debate around the role of historical state-building processes in current political dynamics and regime change in the region.

### ***Illiberal Democracy That Binds***

Whereas Brownlee and Yom have placed the durability of authoritarian rule in their geopolitical alliances with Western powers, namely the United States, Daniel Ritter in his provocative *The Iron Cage of Liberalism* presents a competing analysis. He aims to set out the conditions under which unarmed revolutions succeed in some cases, while they fail to bring down autocratic regimes in others. He suggests that the key to understanding why unarmed revolutions emerge and whether they manage to topple autocratic regimes lies in the power of liberal democratic rhetoric adopted by the autocrat as a result of Western pressure.

The book's central argument shows that the context of unarmed revolutions lies in the foreign policy orientation of authoritarian regimes. Western powers, in their relationships with authoritarian regimes, are often met with the dilemma of reconciling their claims of normative superiority and their bonds with some authoritarian regimes based on economic and geopolitical considerations. To legitimize these relationships, Western powers push their autocratic client to paint themselves as 'façade democracies'. Hence, autocratic regimes espouse rhetorically the discursive element of liberal values and norms, such as human rights, freedom, the rule of law, etc. This discursive commitment constrains both the democratic states and their authoritarian clients by holding them

hostage to this liberal rhetoric. Echoing Max Webber's notion of the 'iron cage of rationality', Ritter argues that liberalism plays a similar constraining role. Ironically, 'façade democracies' that iterate the liberal political discourse become accountable for it at the domestic level. Trapped in this discursive cage, authoritarian regimes tolerate unarmed revolutions that appeal to these liberal principles.

To explicate this argument, Ritter presents a rigorous, rich comparative-historical analysis to trace the impact of international relations between Western powers and authoritarian regimes on the plausibility of unarmed revolutions. He examines three successful cases of unarmed revolutions: Iran in 1979, Tunisia, and Egypt in 2011. He, then, contrasts them with three failed cases: Iran in 2009, and Libya and Syria in the context of the 2011 Arab Uprisings. In the first three cases, the foreign policy reliance on Western democracies created a 'self-imposed' iron cage, whereby authoritarian regimes were trapped in the liberal political discourse, which created the context for the rise of unarmed, peaceful protests. In the latter cases, the close cooperation with autocratic regional powers, such as China and Russia, exhibited, however, the lack of an 'iron cage', which led to the rise of violent protests and less restraint on these authoritarian regimes to use violence in oppressing these protests.

The book is presented in four parts. Part I outlines the central argument of the book while situating it within the existing literature on unarmed revolutions and civil resistance. The book clearly makes a contribution by showing how international factors play a decisive role in shaping domestic outcomes. Part II of the book examines the international relationships between Iranian, Egyptian, and Tunisian regimes and Western powers before the revolutions. Whereas the three regimes benefited economically and politically from strong relationships with Western patrons, they were compelled to embrace a liberal rhetoric. Whereas this alliance with the West contributed to the survival of these authoritarian regimes, it also forced them to behave like 'façade democracies' in a way that conforms to their patrons' values and norms. Part III focuses on the domestic dimension of the argument. It traces the domestic opposition that emerged in those three countries. The authoritarian alliances with Western powers created a context incentivising these domestic groups to embrace similarly the liberal rhetoric in their opposition, which made repression particularly costly. Part IV examines the three negative cases—namely Iran 2009, Libya and Syria in 2011—where political activism led to violent revolutions. The book concludes by offering the theoretical implications of the argument while exploring its applicability beyond the Middle East.

Ritter makes a provocative contribution to the scholarly study of the international dimensions of unarmed revolutions and the breakdown of authoritarianism. He shows how authoritarian regimes are often caught in the dilemma of engaging with Western powers to ensure survival while endorsing a liberal rhetoric. This strategy contains the seeds for domestic unrest and unarmed revolutions, which can lead to the toppling of the regime. In



this regard, Ritter complements Brownlee's argument in explaining why and when the international support could not prevent the ouster of the dictator. Nevertheless, Ritter's argument does not specify why actors are compelled to conform to liberal norms in the first place. In his view, liberalism constitutes a normative structure that constrains both Western powers and their authoritarian clients in the Middle East. What is missing from the theoretical argument is the intrinsic characteristics of liberal norms that determine their influence on political dynamics. States often construct norms but also violate them. The IR discipline has long examined the emergence of norms as well as the conditions under which actors choose or not to conform. It is, therefore, necessary to explore why liberal norms are distinct in imposing this 'iron cage'. As not all alliances with the West lead to the constitution of such 'iron cage', Ritter does not specify when this 'iron cage' comes to exist. The Gulf monarchies are strong allies of the United States. Yet, brutal repression and violence occurred in Bahrain in 2011 despite the peaceful nature of protests. Notwithstanding those minor issues, *The Iron Cage of Liberalism* presents new insights to the literature on revolutions as well as the emerging literature on the international dimensions of domestic outcomes during periods of political change.

### ***The Way Forward***

In the last decade, research on the 'second image reversed' has taken a new dimension with the increasing interest in the international sources of authoritarian resilience and breakdown in the Middle East. These three outstanding books provide compelling evidence that international factors influence authoritarianism in myriad ways. Furthermore, they show the value of comparative-historical analysis and mid-range theorizing in advancing current debates about the study of Middle East politics in general and the international dimensions of authoritarianism and democratic transitions in particular. Studying the Middle East can help us refine theories about the impact of international structure on domestic outcomes to be tested globally. In other words, scholars of IR and Comparative Politics have much to learn from the intermingling of international and domestic dynamics in the Middle East.

Despite this advance in the literature, there are many gaps to be addressed. Even though the three authors assert that they do not address the long-term aftermath of regime change, the question of whether revolutions (Yom) or unarmed revolutions (Ritter) or the collapse of the head of the regime (Brownlee) lead to successful democratic transitions in the long term remains entirely untouched. The autocratic restoration in Egypt in 2013 following a failed transition has shown that the internal dynamics of authoritarian rule can override international factors in shaping domestic outcomes. Therefore, it remains unclear when and the conditions under which domestic structures override international effects in shaping domestic outcomes and vice versa.

Furthermore, the research on the international dimensions of authoritarianism remains confined within a Comparative Politics perspective. The IR perspective remains,

however, limited and overlooked, where the agency of authoritarian regimes is largely unexplored. The underlying assumption that predominates the literature is that authoritarian regimes engage with alliances with the West based on the domestic prerequisite of regime survival. Yet, authoritarian regimes also have regional and international considerations that come to play in their decision-making process. In this aspect, the agency of authoritarian regimes is based on several domestic and external factors shaping their policy choices. From this view, an in-depth dialogue between the IR and Comparative Politics perspectives while including the agency of authoritarian regimes can enlighten our understanding of the conditions under which international factors influence domestic outcomes.

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