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**Working Paper**

## Authoritarian Regime Learning: Comparative Insights from the Arab Uprisings

GIGA Working Papers, No. 274

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies

*Suggested Citation:* Bank, André; Edel, Mirjam (2015) : Authoritarian Regime Learning: Comparative Insights from the Arab Uprisings, GIGA Working Papers, No. 274, German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA), Hamburg

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/111394>

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GIGA Research Programme:  
Legitimacy and Efficiency of Political Systems

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Authoritarian Regime Learning:  
Comparative Insights from the Arab Uprisings

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No 274

June 2015

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GIGA Research Programme “Legitimacy and Efficiency of Political Systems”

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# Authoritarian Regime Learning: Comparative Insights from the Arab Uprisings

## Abstract

This paper examines the learning of authoritarian regimes in the early phase of the Arab uprisings. Differentiating conceptually between learning and policy change, we analyze and compare the authoritarian regimes of Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, and Syria and their reactions to the challenge of “late riser” oppositional protests. We first show that the four regimes initiated very diverse measures in the domains of repression, material co-optation, and legal reforms. With regard to the sources of learning, we find that proximity is a determining factor, in terms of both geography and political similarity. Using the case of Bahrain, we then demonstrate that structural factors such as internal power structures, regional and international pressures, or state capacity can decisively constrain the implementation of learning-induced policy change. Overall, the paper aims to contribute to the emerging research on the international dimension of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and beyond.

Keywords: learning, authoritarian regimes, Arab Spring, policy change, lesson-drawing

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# Authoritarian Regime Learning: Comparative Insights from the Arab Uprisings

André Bank and Mirjam Edel

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### 1 Introduction

The popular uprisings that spread across many Arab countries in 2010/11 underline the fact that oppositional activists learned from each other, with protest repertoires quickly diffusing across national boundaries. Not only were oppositional slogans such as “the people demand the downfall of the regime” (*ash-sha’b yurid isqat an-nizam*) actively taken up by activists across the region, but core protest practices such as the mass sit-ins in central squares could also be observed from Cairo to Manama, and from Dar’a and Homs to Sana’a (Patel, Bunce, and Wolchik 2014). These forms of cross-border oppositional diffusion and learning have al-

so been observed in previous periods of regime change cascades, such as in Europe in 1848, in Eastern Europe in 1989, and during the “Color Revolutions” (Hale 2013; cf. also Weyland 2012; Gunitsky 2014). While studies on the international diffusion, learning, and cooperation of oppositional activities have thus become widespread in recent years, comparable research on whether and what those on the opposing side – that is, the authoritarian elites themselves – learned during the respective regime crises is still in its infancy.

The few contributions that do actually focus on the issue point out that key political decision makers are subject to learning and diffusion processes that have effects on policy making and may thus potentially alter the political situation on the ground (for the Arab states, Heydemann and Leenders 2014; Leenders 2013; for China, Shambaugh 2008). The learning processes of ruling elites are a central factor influencing political behavior during crises and are therefore important to our understanding of the processes that took place during the Arab uprisings (cf. Heydemann and Leenders 2014) and beyond. By taking a look at the learning of ruling elites, we acknowledge and highlight the role of agency in regime crises. However, we hold that it would be premature to assume that all learning is transformed into actual policy change. Rather, there are structural constraints on the transmission of authoritarian regime learning into policy changes.

Against this background, the two guiding research questions of this paper are as follows: In which domains did authoritarian learning in the Arab uprisings result in policy changes? And related to this, if no policy change occurred, was this due to a lack of learning or did transmission fail? To this end, we compare Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, and Syria in the early phase of the Arab uprisings in 2011. With regard to the first question, we argue that the domains of learning range from more repression-centered learning (Syria) to more legal-reform-related learning (Jordan), with hybrid forms in between (Algeria, Bahrain). As for the second question, we argue that the transmission from learning into policy changes can be constrained by internal decision-making structures, international influence, and limited financial or security-related capacities.

The paper proceeds as follows: We first specify what we mean by learning and policy change. Then, second, we elaborate on our case selection and present our four country studies of Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, and Syria. Third, we discuss the results comparatively in order to identify some broader lessons about authoritarian regime learning during the Arab uprisings. Finally, we reexamine the scope of our study and identify future avenues of research.

## 2 Learning and Policy Change

When decision makers are dissatisfied with their current policies, they tend to search for alternatives (Rose 1991). Often, it is more convenient not to invent new policies and strategies from scratch, but rather to evaluate experiences from previous times and different places.

This is referred to as learning or lesson-drawing. Following Jack Levy, we define learning broadly as a “change of beliefs, skills, or procedures based on the observation and interpretation of experience” (Levy 1994: 296). In the political realm, learning means that ruling elites, governments and administrations observe and analyze developments from other times and other places, compare these observations with their prior beliefs, and adapt the latter accordingly. Learning can take two basic forms: We can distinguish between “simple” learning that induces a change in *means* – that is, in processes and instruments – and “complex” learning that leads to *goal* changes, based on a shift of ideas and paradigms as well (Levy 1994: 286; Bennett and Howlett 1992: 289). The concept of learning stresses the open-ended nature of change and thereby allows us to distinguish between the cognitive process and the related change in behavior on the one hand and the effectiveness of that behavioral change on the other hand.<sup>1</sup>

Still, the scholarly literature on learning has often conflated learning processes with the policy change potentially induced by them. It is true that ruling elites, governments, and administrations try to evaluate their own and others’ experiences with the aim of improving their policies. Yet while experiential learning in the political sphere is an action that most often *aims* to achieve policy change, it does not inevitably *result* in it. Furthermore, policy change can have causes other than learning – for example, a changed constellation of political actors or transformations in the international or domestic structure (Levy 1994: 310). Put differently, learning is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for policy change. Therefore, it is important to conceptually and empirically distinguish between learning and policy change and to specify the concrete relationship between them.

One reason why learning and policy change have often been lumped together is that it can be methodologically challenging to clearly identify learning because of its inherent cognitive, experiential nature “within” human beings. In the empirical analysis of regimes, it is therefore reasonable to depart from policies of interest, which are easily observable, and to then “go back” in the causal chain to evaluate whether policy change stems from learning, whether learning processes were present in unchanged policy areas, and – if this was the case – why their transmission into policy changes was hindered.<sup>2</sup> When regime learning is studied from this perspective, learning-induced policy changes can be absent for three reasons: (1) learning has not taken place at all, (2) the transmission of learning has been constrained, or (3) an appropriate situation for applying the lessons learned has not existed

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1 This distinguishes “learning” from “adaptation.” For the latter, see Heydemann (2007) and Heydemann and Leenders (2013). Otherwise, “learning” and “adaptation” share many similarities, among them the common assumption that regimes need to react to new circumstances, but can do so in an active and potentially innovative manner.

2 A regime is defined as “the formal and informal organization of the center of political power, and of its relations with the broader society. A regime determines who has access to political power, and how those who are in power deal with those who are not” (Fishman 1990: 428).

(Levy 1994: 290). Given the context of serious and publicly observable challenges to rule – regime crises according to our terminology – we assume that an appropriate situation and, even more, a *need* for policy changes existed during the Arab uprisings.<sup>3</sup> In the remainder of this section, we therefore take a closer look at the first two reasons for the absence of learning-induced policy change.

Firstly, learning sometimes does not happen in the first place because ruling elites are not open or aware enough. In order for individuals or groups to learn, they must be open to and aware of both the field of learning and its possible sources. The awareness of potential learners may be limited to certain policy fields only. In this regard, it is important to consider the decision maker's background, as his or her different experiences and socialization patterns are likely to influence both his or her perspective on political phenomena and his or her openness to learning. Individual decision makers may, for example, have a military or security background or they may have spent a large part of their lives in business, royal circles, or political parties. In terms of the sources of learning, the proximity of the teacher and the learner is important, in multiple senses: geographical proximity, a common language, a shared ideology, and well-established prior relations between the ruling elites of different countries all increase the likelihood that learning will take place.

Secondly, learning does not guarantee change. Structural constraints might exist that limit the transformation of changed beliefs into actual political changes on the ground. Ruling elites in a given country can be limited by institutional and power settings at the level of single organizational units within the state, at the level of regime structures as a whole and at the level of the international context. Even though all of the Arab authoritarian regimes we are interested in are located in the Middle East and North Africa, a closer look reveals quite substantial differences between them. These regimes vary especially with regard to how many elite members are involved, and how they are involved, in key decision-making processes. We can broadly distinguish between collectivist and personalist decision making (with grades in between), and between regimes with more hierarchical and more fragmented decision-making structures.

In the next section, we present our four cases of authoritarian regime learning during the Arab uprisings.

### 3 Authoritarian Regime Learning in Algeria, Jordan, Bahrain, and Syria

Based on the aforementioned conceptual considerations, we have selected four authoritarian regimes from the Middle East according to two central criteria: the existence of a regime crisis in early 2011 and the fact that the respective country was a “late riser,” as opposed to an

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3 A rival interpretation would hold that regimes only learn when it is “safer” and that they rely on “tried and tested” measures.



“early riser,” during the Arab uprisings. First, the country must have experienced a potential regime crisis during the Arab uprisings of 2010/11, as evidenced by the existence of (new forms of) social and political mobilization. The authoritarian rentier monarchies of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as well as the authoritarian rentier republic of Iraq have therefore been excluded. Second, the country should not have been an “early riser” in the Arab uprisings, since it is to be expected that regime learning and the ensuing policy change (or absence of it) take some time. This criterion has thus excluded the authoritarian semi-rentier republics of Egypt and Tunisia, as well as the authoritarian rentier republic of Libya.<sup>4</sup> Based on these two criteria and given the availability of data, we have selected from the remaining cases and settled on the four countries Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, and Syria. This specific case selection has the additional advantage that the four chosen countries each represent one particular subtype of authoritarian regime from the Middle East: Bahrain is a rentier monarchy; Algeria is a rentier republic; Jordan is a semi-rentier monarchy; and Syria is a semi-rentier republic.

In each of the four cases studies, we begin with a brief description of the crisis context in early 2011. To detect how regime learning in these countries has differed with regard to the extent that it has been transmitted into policy change and the domains in which this has occurred, we then look at the policy changes and continuities in each country.<sup>5</sup> In the context of regime crises, it is essential to look at policies targeted towards ending the crisis. We particularly focus on policies in three domains: repressive measures (for example, protest policing tactics, arrests), legal measures (for example, adaptations of the constitution, party laws), and material measures (for example, salary increases, subsidies, extra payments). We then try to uncover whether these changes have stemmed from learning by evaluating the behavior of the respective decision makers and important regime agencies, and by analyzing possible sources of learning in each of the countries’ own past and in other Middle Eastern countries. We subsequently summarize and compare the main findings from each case, in Section 4, in order to determine how policy change (and learning) has varied between Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, and Syria.

### ***3.1 Algeria: Learning to Better Exploit Strengths***

In the first days of January 2011, demonstrations and riots were launched in Oran and Algiers in the context of rising food prices. Even though socioeconomic protests had been common in the past (Josua 2014: 144; Volpi 2013: 106), they were now reinforced by the dynamics in Tunisia, but still rather “short and apolitical” (Layachi 2014: 136). Soon after President Ben Ali’s ousting in Tunisia, a political alliance called *Coordination nationale pour le*

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4 For an early, comparative account of the three “early risers” in the Arab uprisings, see Anderson 2011.

5 Whether policy change has actually taken place is assessed by comparing the policies observed during the Arab uprisings with behavior in dealing with previous challenges to rule within the same country.

changement et la démocratie (CNCD) was formed in Algeria on 21 January 2011; however, due to a combination of regime repression and internal coordination and framing problems, the movement could not gain much momentum and disbanded only a month later. Opposition activities continued, but the challenge remained manageable for the Algerian elites and security forces, who undertook diverse measures to prevent more extensive mobilization.

Already on 8 January 2011, an increase in subsidies had been announced to buy off discontent. Later, the salaries of government personnel and the police forces, as well as pensions, were increased considerably. The younger generation was specifically targeted through a program called Agence Nationale de Soutien à l'Emploi des Jeunes (ANSEJ), which provided loans and credits that were not expected to be paid back as a means to buy social peace from the unemployed youth (Josua 2014: 181–182). While similar measures had been part of the Algerian policy repertoire for a long time, the timing and intensity of some of these material measures were influenced by the Tunisian experience: As Algeria had been affected by developments in Tunisia before,<sup>6</sup> Algerian regime elites were immediately aware of the potential impact of Tunisian developments on protest dynamics in their own country and tried to be more proactive than their Tunisian counterparts. They lowered oil and sugar prices even before the Tunisian president fled his country on 14 January. Thanks to hydrocarbon revenues, material benefits played a larger role in the ruling elite's program of countering the protests than in the other Arab republics – crisis management was undertaken “Gulf-monarchy style” (Volpi 2013: 110).

In addition, repressive measures were widely used to counter mobilization and ultimately proved to be relatively effective. This was partly due to the fact that the repression strategy incapacitated protesters in a fairly targeted manner, with little violence and only for a limited time (Josua 2014: 149). No live ammunition was used, and the strategy aimed to prevent deaths. This was in contrast to the approach utilized during previous large demonstrations such as those in October 1988 or the Kabyle protests in 2001. Apparently, the Algerian elites had realized the symbolic and mobilizing power of fatalities, as demonstrated in the slogan “We are all Khaled Said” in Egypt or the impact of Muhammad Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia. Furthermore, protesters were prevented for the most part from forming large crowds and from occupying strategically and symbolically important squares. Before the demonstration on 12 February – which was to end at May 1 Square in Algiers and meant to be a high point of protest activities – could begin, the Algerian security forces cut off major traffic lines and arrested known activists for one day.

As the Algerian security services were accustomed to various forms of riots and strikes across the country, they relied on their own earlier experiences in policing and containment. Strategies that had been used in the past could be reutilized or adapted. At the same time, the

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6 A look at the past suggests that “what happens in Tunisia often finds a rapid echo in Algeria, generally in a manner that is more radical and widespread, as a result of the latter's political and cultural specificities” (Jaby, 30 May 2011).

Egyptian Tahrir Square phenomenon led the security apparatus to enhance its prevention of gatherings at central places. The main precondition for this was obviously the extensive security apparatus, staffed with approximately 200,000 police officers equipped with anti-riot weaponry such as special trucks, and the large army in the background (Achy 2013: 12). Furthermore, Algerian elites had a free hand in choosing their methods and applying lessons learned, as the country's links to other countries were not constraining it: First, the country receives over 90 percent of its weapons from Russia, without political conditions. Second, the neighboring European states also have only limited leverage over Algeria, largely because of the former's dependence on Algeria's natural resources.

Another important component of the countering actions was legal reforms.<sup>7</sup> Most of these were announced from April 2011 onwards, but already on 24 February the 19-year-old state of emergency was officially lifted. The plan to lift it had been announced on 3 February. Despite the passing of a restrictive terrorism law, this symbolic gesture was somewhat effective. The second round of reforms, which President Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced in his speech on 15 April 2011, focused mainly on legal measures that resulted in a superficial political reformism. In May 2011, the president started a consultation process led by the National Commission of Consultation on Political Reforms (CNCRP) that brought about some smaller changes, most notably the approval of new parties and a law on a women's quota in parliament (Layachi 2014: 140). However, several new laws effectively limited freedoms – for example, the new associations law. All in all, the legal reforms remained within the scope of the familiar in Algerian politics. While the regime elites did study the impact of measures taken in other North African countries to minimize the size and impact of protests (Zoubir and Aghrout 2012: 66), it is difficult to ascertain to what extent they did so.

To summarize, Algerian elites learned from the “early risers” Tunisia and Egypt and were able to transmit these insights into some adapted repressive and material strategies. They otherwise drew on past experiences, above all from the civil war of the 1990s, either adapting the measures used in the earlier situations, as was the case with some repressive tactics, or reapplying those that were tried and tested. Algerian elites faced few constraints in transmitting their lessons learned into policy changes. The main challenge was posed by the decentralized, collectivist decision-making structure, which included the military leadership as well as “civilian” elites such as President Bouteflika. On the other hand, this structure prevented activists from focusing their demands on one person. Thus, the fluid and decentralized mode of decision making also contributed to Algeria's ability to manage the popular uprisings better than many other Arab states (cf. Volpi 2013: 105).

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7 Another set of strategies applied during the Algerian uprising – which we largely leave aside in this contribution – is the regime discourse, which in the Algerian crisis centered on security and steadfastness. This resonated not only with the citizens' fears of a recurrence of the civil war from the 1990s but also with the massive violence in neighboring Libya.

### 3.2 Jordan: Continuity and Learning via Proximity

The Jordanian uprising was primarily inspired and influenced by events in Egypt in early 2011. Following violent clashes in the rural south, “street politics” in Jordan increasingly shifted to the northern cities of Amman and Zarqa in January and February. The urban Muslim Brotherhood, the traditional opposition, which advocates a constitutional monarchy with a real division of powers, gained in influence. Alongside the moderate Islamists, the Youth of 24 March and the HIRAK (Arabic for “movements”) emerged as new and overwhelmingly trans-Jordanian opposition forces during the spring of 2011.<sup>8</sup> In the end, however, the protests in Jordan did not achieve the intensity or breadth of those in many other states in the region. This was because, to a large extent, the Hashemite monarchy relied on tried and tested measures to weather the storm of the Arab uprisings in the country.

First, the regime under King Abdullah II permitted demonstrations to take place, but with a strong state security presence.<sup>9</sup> The General Intelligence Directorate (GID) and the gendarmerie forces (Darak) oversaw both the rural and the urban protests in Jordan in great numbers. During the large Friday protest on 18 February 2011, which took place only a week after President Hosni Mubarak was ousted in Egypt, royalist thugs attacked the opposition activists for the first time (Josua 2014: 129). At the biggest demonstration of Jordan’s uprising, the youth movements’ sit-in at the Interior Ministry Circle in central Amman on 24 March, a similar pattern could be observed: The Darak used water cannons, sticks, and batons to help royalist thugs violently disperse the opposition activists. Despite the repression on this day, the overall level of repression continued to be rather low, especially compared to the rest of the region (Josua and Edel 2015). The use of thugs alongside the official regime security agencies, however, was a new phenomenon in the politics of repression in Jordan. Even though there is no direct evidence of learning in this regard, the Jordanian pro-regime thugs were reminiscent of the Egyptian *baltagiya*, who had become (in)famous for their persecution of the opposition at Cairo’s Tahrir Square only shortly before in January and February 2011.

Second, beyond these repressive measures and similarly to the case in previous regime-crisis situations – for example, the tribal riots in April 1989 – the king and other key decision makers provided material incentives to co-opt crucial societal groups. As events began to unfold in January 2011, King Abdullah II and the government raised public sector wages, hoping to minimize discontent within the state bureaucracy. They also rescinded previously announced subsidy cuts on fuel and cooking gas. These material measures were intended to prevent the small-scale social protests from spreading, especially to the countryside, from which the traditional Hashemite support base hails. As a further part of his co-optation strategy, King Abdullah II visited major tribal confederations across the country, promising future investments and emphasizing these groups’ continued importance in monarchical Jor-

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8 On the new protest movements in Jordan, see Yom 2014, 2015.

9 On the policing of protests in Jordan, see Schwedler 2012.

dan. The Hashemite king also continued to regularly employ traditional and religious tropes to legitimize his rule.

Whereas the repressive and material measures underline the continuity of authoritarian regime strategies in Jordan, two new policy dynamics became apparent in 2011: The first was increased intermonarchical support during the Arab uprisings. More than ever before, Jordanian elites stressed the country's geostrategically crucial buffer position between Israel/Palestine, the Gulf, Iraq, and the newly emerging conflict hotspot of Syria to its donors. Given the broader regional instability from early to mid-2011, this led to increased financial and diplomatic support, most notably from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, and culminated in the extension of a symbolic invitation to Jordan – along with the “fellow” monarchy of Morocco – to join the GCC in early May 2011. Together with the continued backing provided by the US and the EU, this increased intermonarchical support granted the otherwise resource-poor Jordanian regime important leeway to pursue its domestic priorities. There were thus no decisive external constraints to the regime's behavior in 2011.

The second dynamic is even more important in the context of authoritarian regime learning. It involves the legal and, in particular, constitutional reforms undertaken in Jordan in 2011 and is a case of direct learning from another's positive example: the constitutional reform in Morocco. There are a number of indications that the constitutional reform in Jordan in 2011, first, really constitutes a case of learning from Morocco and, second, led to concrete policy change. One of these indications is that, in contrast to Morocco, there is no tradition of top-down “constitutionalization” as a policy measure in crisis situations in Jordan. In the earlier regime crises, in 1996 and 1999/2000, the Jordanian king did not initiate changes to the constitution of 1952, instead employing the aforementioned tried and tested measures.

The more decisive indication of the learning and policy change dynamic in 2011 is the sequence of the reform in Morocco and the Jordanian reactions to it: The Moroccan King Muhammad VI declared early on – in his speech from the throne on 9 March 2011, less than three weeks after the large 20 February demonstrations in the country – that a wide-ranging process of constitutional reform would be initiated. He then appointed an expert commission to develop a draft. On 17 June, he declared that a referendum on the constitutional reforms would be held on 1 July. The Jordanian ruling elite closely watched the Moroccan constitutional reform process unfold. Like Muhammad VI, King Abdullah II also appointed an expert commission, but with a less clear mandate. There is anecdotal evidence that Jordanian elites were in direct contact with Moroccans involved in the constitutional reform process.<sup>10</sup> But from then on, the Jordanian trajectory departed from the Moroccan one in that no referendum was held on the constitutional changes. On 14 August 2011, King Abdullah II announced a total of 42 mostly minor amendments to the constitution of 1952. The central

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10 Interview (André Bank) with a former Jordanian prime minister, Amman, April 2013.

changes related to the establishment of a constitutional court; restrictions on the powers of the state security courts, which have a reputation for being particularly harsh to oppositionists; independent electoral monitoring;<sup>11</sup> and the right to freedom of expression. There is no mention of even a symbolic restriction of the king's absolute power. The regime-loyal parliament formally approved the Jordanian constitutional reform on 24 September 2011.

In sum, this case study of Jordan underlines that while the authoritarian regime under King Abdullah II relied on a number of typical material co-optation measures to control the Arab uprisings, it also profited from increased intermonarchical cooperation in the Middle East as well as the active learning derived from the positive, successful example of the geographically distant but politically similar Morocco's constitutional reforms. Jordan's implementation of constitutional reforms in 2011 is a particularly strong example of learning-induced policy change.

### *3.3 Bahrain: Constrained Transmission of Learning*

The Bahraini uprising of 2011 was characterized by immense protests by all main opposition forces and the dropping out of the previously co-opted opposition party, Al-Wifaq, from parliament. Even though the country has only approximately 1.2 million inhabitants, at some points more than 100,000 protesters were on the streets. Their demands centered on democratic reforms, human rights, and an end to the discrimination against the Shi'i majority. The ruling elites were seriously challenged and reacted mainly by cracking down on protesters, media, and the Internet, and by dismissing disloyal citizens from jobs and universities. These actions were flanked by material appeasement, national dialogue processes, and a rhetoric that blamed foreign – namely, Iranian – interference for the protests. In contrast to many other countries involved in the Arab uprisings – including the three others presented here – Bahrain did not initiate any legal reforms. The regime and the opposition remain stuck in a deadlock today, with clashes occurring on regular basis.

Before protests began in Bahrain on 14 February 2011, the ruling elites implemented initial material legitimation measures in an attempt to take the wind out of the dissidents' sails. On 11 February the Bahraini government announced that in order "[t]o praise the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the National Action charter," 1,000 dinar (USD 2,650) would be given to each Bahraini family (Reuters, 2/11/2011). This was in contrast to the strategies utilized during the previous major regime crisis in the 1990s and hints at the fact that other regional experiences were being taken into account in policy making. For example, the Kuwaiti government had distributed money to all families on 19 January 2011 in an effort to diminish socioeconomically driven protests. Though material co-optation had been common in Bahrain before, it

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11 The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) indeed oversaw the Jordanian parliamentary elections of 23 January 2013. This and the slight changes to the controversial electoral law did not, however, alter the fact that pro-regime candidates continue to make up a vast absolute majority in the elected Lower House.

was typically directed more towards state employees and Sunni families only (cf. Byman 2002: 92ff.). Both the timing and the similar design of the measure arguably indicate that, in February 2011, Bahrain was copying the Kuwaiti strategy.<sup>12</sup> In order to support Bahrain's ability to provide material benefits, the GCC launched a USD-10-billion fund on 10 March.

Beyond these material measures, the regime's reaction to the protests consisted primarily of massive repression via the police forces, including the first clearing of Pearl Roundabout, a central square in the capital Manama, on 17 February 2011. After a period of talks between the rulers and the opposition, a second crackdown on protesters assembled at this square followed on 16 March. During the Arab uprisings, the Bahraini regime elites appear to have learned from the case of Egypt how "dangerous" a symbolic square can become. Bahraini decision makers took Pearl Roundabout's symbolic potential so seriously that they even destroyed the roundabout and its sculpture and renamed the redesigned crossroad Al Farooq Junction.<sup>13</sup>

The second crackdown on the protests at Pearl Roundabout marked the starting point of repressive measures conducted during the "State of National Safety," which lasted from mid-March until 1 June 2011. Bahraini security forces and the military – supported by 1,000 soldiers from the Saudi Arabian National Guard and 500 members of the UAE military police (Coates Ulrichsen 2013) – launched a comprehensive crackdown on protesters. Many important opposition figures were arrested, and thousands of people were dismissed from their jobs and from universities (though some were later allowed to return, cf. Bassiouni et al. 2011). Many of the repression strategies used to contain the Bahraini uprising are similar to those observed in the country during the so-called Intifada in the 1990s. In both periods, it was common practice to arrest and terrify Bahraini citizens in house raids (Human Rights Watch 1997), something that was not common during the Arab uprisings except in Syria (Josua and Edel 2015).<sup>14</sup>

Despite the fact that Bahrain had a previous history of legal reforms and King Hamad had used the return to a constitution in 2002 as a means to co-opt the opposition and present himself as a reformer, legal policies did not play a role in regime reactions to the Bahraini uprising. This is partly due to structures that hindered the transmission of the regime's lessons learned into concrete policy change. The talks with several opposition groups initiated by Crown Prince Salman on 19 February 2011 aimed to generate some concessions, which would likely have included legal reforms, in order to satisfy the moderate Al-Wifaq party, which had dropped out of parliament the same day. These talks failed for numerous reasons,

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12 In contrast to many other material strategies, this measure was only used by these two countries, with the partial exception of Libya, which, however, spent a much smaller amount.

13 Ironically, the monument originally symbolized the six GCC countries and had been depicted on various souvenirs and coins. It continues to be used by activists today as a symbol of resistance.

14 Also, the official rhetoric flanking these measures, which blamed Iranian interference, was only a continuation of the methods utilized in previous confrontations with opponents.

one of them being the strengthening of hardliners within the Bahraini elite (International Crisis Group (ICG) 2011c: 9ff.; Louër 2013). In contrast to the reformist wing headed by Prince Salman, the hardliners in the ruling elite around Prime Minister Khalīfa bin Salman and the brothers Khālid and Khalīfa bin Ahmad, the ministers of the Royal Court and of Defense, had been proponents of a security solution from the beginning.<sup>15</sup> This position was also upheld by Saudi Arabia and other members of the GCC, which had strong leverage over decisions made by Bahraini elites and could decisively limit their room for maneuver. There is evidence that such constraints were indeed put on Bahraini decision making in March 2011, when Saudi Arabia pushed for the security solution over reforms.<sup>16</sup> Even before the Arab uprisings, King Hamad had had “to defend Bahrain’s reform effort against GCC pressure by citing the country’s unique history, social makeup and highly educated population” (ICG 2011c: 9, n 66). The combination of internal elite dynamics and external preferences sidelined a reformist, non-security-oriented solution to the regime crisis.

In sum, the measures taken in Bahrain were shaped to a large extent by external and internal constraints: Powerful regional actors, above all Saudi Arabia, and the fragmented power structure in the country jointly prevented the implementation of reforms, especially in the domain of legal policies. Repressive and material measures that would have been difficult to apply due to limited state capacity were actively supported by the GCC. In the domain of repression, regime elites learned from past experiences. Due primarily to the scarcity of proximate models, Bahraini elites learned relatively little from other Arab countries.

### 3.4 *Syria: Learning to Avoid Libya’s Mistakes*

The initial mass protests in Syria were triggered by events in the southern provincial city of Dar’a in mid-March 2011, where a group of teenagers and two women had been arrested and tortured. In reaction, families and tribal leaders took their protest to the streets. However, security forces turned down demands for the immediate release of the prisoners and instead shot at the demonstrators, killing numerous people. As the protests in the city continued, different symbols of the authoritarian regime under President Bashar al-Asad were destroyed, including the local headquarters of the Ba’th Party. In addition to massively quashing the growing protests, the regime also sent a delegation headed by then vice minister of foreign affairs, Faisal al-Miqdad, who hailed from Dar’a. But neither this gesture nor the dismissal of the head of local security operations, a cousin of President Bashar al-Asad, appeased the protesters. These conciliatory regime gestures, which came rather late and were only half-

15 According to different sources, Royal Court minister Shaikh Khālid bin Ahmad sent thugs to the streets to delegitimize the dialogue initiative. Allegedly, he was in direct dispute with Crown Prince Salman over this matter, cf. Gengler (2013: 75). For general information on Bahrain’s different power centers, see Louër (2013) and Gengler (2013).

16 In a *Washington Times* article of April 2011, King Hamad wrote, “We had to make a decision not just for the stability and safety of our countrymen but also for the region.”



hearted, were small carrots, paling in comparison with the all-dominant repressive sticks. The regime reacted to the Dar'a protests mainly with the use of elite military units and snipers and the besieging of a number of the city's neighborhoods. This massive repression succeeded only at spreading the protests to the surrounding southern governorate of Hawran (ICG 2011a; 2011b: 12–13; Leenders and Heydemann 2012; De Juan and Bank 2015).

Beyond Dar'a and southern Syria, the regime's "crisis management" strategy during the early phase of the Arab uprisings in 2011 consisted of three, albeit very unequally distributed, components: first, the overarching strategy of using massive and gradually increasing repression; second, the strategy of announcing and slowly implementing legal reforms; and third, the strategy of implementing selected material measures to co-opt particular social groups. The prime objective of the repression was to contain or even end the territorial and social spread of the protest movement. At the same time, the regime employed excessive and at times crude propaganda that adhered to the mantra of "us versus the chaos" to legitimize its repression and to produce fear of instability in the event of regime change, particularly among the traditionally loyal religious minorities. In state and private media, the protestors were thus interchangeably portrayed as foreign agents, criminal elements, or radical Islamists (ICG 2011a: 2). At the same time, the regime's own security apparatus, the soldiers of the regular army as well as of the irregular militias – including the (in)famous, mostly Alawi *shabiha* ("ghosts"), whose influence increased dramatically over time – had complete immunity when crushing the opposition.

In addition to carrying out the repressive measures, the Syrian regime also announced and slowly implemented legal reforms. By mid-2011, three months into the Syrian uprising, the regime had suspended the state of emergency and initiated new laws on media, political parties, and local administration. In general, these legal reforms came too late, so that their declaration fell on deaf ears. President al-Asad's announcement in his speech on 20 June 2011 that he would initiate a reform of the constitution and reconsider the Ba'th Party's monopoly on power were already useless when they were announced as the protestors were demanding not only political reforms but also a complete regime change.

The regime also tried to co-opt selected social groups. Particularly in the early phase of the uprising, it took the following steps: "raising salaries of public servants; granting fixed contracts to irregular staff at public institutions; providing public employment for a large number of young people; reversing fuel subsidy cuts; lowering consumer taxes; forgiving farmers' and manufacturers' debts; setting higher prices for cotton growers; and reducing the fee for avoiding military service" (Leenders 2013: 334–335). Overall, the regime's threefold crisis management strategy of massive repression, minimal legal reforms, and targeted material co-optation resonated with certain parts of Syrian society.

In crucial ways, the authoritarian regime under President al-Asad departed from its earlier policies during the period 2000–2010, given what was perceived to be the existential challenge emanating from the Arab uprisings in 2011. What remained similar to previous poli-

cies, however, was the regime's continued reliance on co-optation through the provision of financial benefits, particularly to state employees. The regime's use of very one-sided propaganda in both its state and private media outlets (for example, the notorious Dunya TV) was also a continuation of its tactics from earlier periods – for instance, its reporting on the Iraq War after 2003 and the Lebanon War of 2006. The major difference in the regime's strategy was its almost complete reliance on massive repression, first employed against the early risers in Dar'a in March/April 2011 and then against the protest movements across the country. We hold that authoritarian regime learning was a decisive determinant of this regime strategy.

Following Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders, it makes a lot of sense to consider the Syrian regime's main source of learning in the context of the Arab uprisings to be the – ultimately failed – counterinsurgency of the Libyan regime under Colonel Mu'ammār al-Gaddafi (2014: 78ff.). In the view of Syrian elites, the "Libyan Model" provided crucial, typically negative lessons, which they tried to avoid repeating when employing repression: First, the Syrian regime tried to avoid a "Benghazi scenario" – that is, it aimed to prevent the installation of a military launching pad for the opposition near an international border. The massively repressive campaign against Dar'a (close to the border with Jordan) in March/April 2011 and Rastan (close to the border with Lebanon) in June 2011 are indicative of this. Second and related to this, it tried to cut off opposition and rebel supplies by placing disproportionately large security forces near international borders. Third, the president and other leading regime figures tried to tone down their rhetoric and to label opposition figures as "terrorists," a notion which international and especially Western audiences would find "adequately problematic." Fourth and finally, it tried to only gradually increase lethal violence and repression in order to minimize the threat of international intervention. The gradual militarization of the regime campaign from spring to summer 2011 and in the later phases of the Syrian civil war testifies to this.

In summary, experiential learning has been decisive for the continued survival of the, albeit very weakened, authoritarian regime in Syria. However, the type of learning experienced by the regime in Syria has been quite specific: Against the background of the regional Arab uprisings, a key reason for the country's specific use of repression was to prevent the failure experienced by a relatively similar case abroad, Libya. Rather than evidence of lessons from the country's own recent history – be it the massive counterinsurgency in Hama against the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in 1982, which killed between 10,000 and 30,000 people according to different estimations, or the more recent uprisings under the presidency of Bashar al-Asad, particularly in the Kurdish-dominated Qamishli and al-Hasakeh governorates in 2004/05 – the Syrian authoritarian regime's approach demonstrates many more similarities with events occurring in other countries in the region in the same period. Ultimately, the regime's learning led the country to take the most violent political trajectory of all the Arab uprisings.

#### 4 Comparative Lessons from the Arab Uprisings: Domains, Sources, and Structural Constraints of Regime Learning

The four cases of Algeria, Jordan, Bahrain, and Syria reveal that the respective authoritarian regimes learned in numerous and diverse ways during the Arab uprisings. Before taking a closer look at the learning-induced policy changes, the related sources of learning, and the structural constraints on learning, it is important to note that based on the available data, in all four cases fundamental changes to belief systems were absent. The authoritarian regimes in the four countries resorted to forms of “simple” learning about the appropriate means with which to address the challenge of the Arab uprisings; we have not found any evidence of “complex” learning, including changes in ruling elites’ basic goals. Put differently, the Arab authoritarian regimes under study resorted to well-known repertoires and only readjusted the scale, timing, or framing of specific policies, or made more intensive use of some tactics while cutting back others.

**Table 1: Authoritarian Regime Learning during the Arab Uprisings**

	Learning-induced policy changes	Sources of learning
Algeria	<b>m:</b> Timely increase in subsidies and wages	Hesitant reactions in Tunisia: <i>failure</i>
	<b>r:</b> Prevention of gatherings in squares	Tahrir Square, Egypt: <i>failure</i>
	<b>r:</b> Avoidance of killing of protesters	Mobilization though fatalities in Tunisia and Egypt: <i>failure</i>
Jordan	<b>m:</b> Timely increase in wages, rescinding of subsidy cuts	Material co-optation strategies used in the past: <i>success</i>
	<b>l:</b> Constitutional reforms	Swift constitutional reforms in Morocco: <i>success</i>
	<b>r:</b> Intensive policing, but avoidance of killings	Repressive strategies used in the past: <i>success</i>
Bahrain	<b>m:</b> Extra payments for families	Extra payments in Kuwait: <i>success</i>
	<b>r:</b> House raids, job dismissals	Repressive strategies used in the past: <i>success</i>
	<b>r:</b> Violent breaking-up of gatherings in squares	Tahrir Square, Egypt: <i>failure</i>
Syria	<b>r:</b> Gradually increasing violence	Massive violence in Libya: <i>failure</i>
	<b>r:</b> Military concentration near borders	Oppositional launching pad near border in Libya: <i>failure</i>
	<b>m:</b> Increase in public sector salaries	Material co-optation strategies used in the past: <i>success</i>

Note: r, m, and l refer to the three domains of learning: repression (r), material measures (m), and legal reforms (l). *Success* refers to “learning from success.” *Failure* refers to “learning from failure.”

#### 4.1 *Domains of Learning*

As the detailed overview in Table 1 illustrates, the cases of Algeria, Jordan, Bahrain, and Syria differ in terms of the *domains* in which learning-induced policy changes took place during the early phase of the Arab uprisings. In Algeria, the prime focus was in the domain of material measures, particularly the timely increase of subsidies and wages for crucial societal groups. At the same time, repressive measures were prominent. On the one hand, they were geared towards preventing oppositional gatherings in public squares; on the other, they aimed to avoid the killing of protesters. Legal reform measures were present in Algeria as well, but they were much less important and were hardly the result of learning.

In Jordan, in contrast, the Hashemite regime drew equally on each of the three domains of material, legal, and repressive measures. In the domain of material measures, the regime quickly increased public sector wages and rescinded earlier subsidy cuts. Importantly, King Abdullah II and the ruling elite undertook constitutional reforms, which, even though they were only cosmetic in substance, were unprecedented in Jordan and thus a very significant instance of learning-induced legal policy change. Finally, in the domain of repression, the regime continued its intensive policing of rural and urban protests, avoiding overly harsh repression and the killing of protestors at the same time.

In Bahrain, legal reforms did not play an important role in the early phase of the Arab uprisings. Rather, the regime under King Hamad resorted to extra payments for families. In general, however, the domain of repression was clearly dominant: First, the regime ordered house raids on alleged opposition activists, later expanding this persecution to include job dismissals. Second, the regime violently broke up protest gatherings held in public squares, most prominently in Pearl Roundabout in the capital Manama.

In Syria, the domain of repression was clearly dominant. Starting in March 2011, the regime under President al-Asad gradually increased the already-high level of state violence. Furthermore, it concentrated its military troops near the borders of Jordan and Lebanon. In addition to repression, material measures were also utilized, especially increased salaries for public sector employees. Various legal reform measures were also implemented in Syria, but these paled in comparison to the all-dominant repression and, to a lesser degree, the material co-optation.

This *domain-oriented* overview of learning-induced policy changes underlines the diversity of the repressive, material, and legal measures taken by the authoritarian regimes in Algeria, Jordan, Bahrain, and Syria in both substantive and relative terms. An obvious explanation as to why the Bahraini and Syrian regimes put so much more emphasis on repressive measures is that the respective uprisings constituted a more fundamental, essentially revolutionary, challenge to their rule when compared to the allegedly more reformist oppositional projects in Algeria and Jordan. While this “nature of the threat” hypothesis makes intuitive sense, we still lack convincing evidence that this is really what drove decision making in the four cases in 2011. An alternative or complementary hypothesis to the threat perception ar-

gument could focus on the socialization of key regime elites. In Algeria, Bahrain, and Syria, key decision-making positions were held by people who had risen to prominent positions through the channels of the military, the security services, or the police. Their perception of the world in general and of social protests in particular was arguably more security-centered than that of people socialized in political parties, royal courts, or business circles. Again, however, we do not have convincing evidence to corroborate the socialization hypothesis in the context of the Arab uprisings.

## 4.2 Sources of Learning

Beyond the domains of learning, a comparison of the main findings of the four case studies also yields new insights about the *sources* of learning: The authoritarian regime in Algeria drew lessons from other countries in North Africa, particularly from neighboring Tunisia, where the mass protests and the ensuing regime-breakdown processes actually started. Egypt was also a crucial source of learning for Algerian elites, as events in the former resonated widely within the Arab societies – hence, the *Arab* uprisings. Jordan, by contrast, drew inspiration for its constitutional reforms from the geographically distant yet politically similar – that is, non-oil and non-Gulf based – monarchy of Morocco (Bank 2012: 31–33). In Bahrain, Kuwait and Egypt provided arguably less influential external sources of learning. In the case of Syria, it was primarily the counterinsurgency strategy of Colonel Gaddafi in Libya that provided the decisive “script” from which the authoritarian regime under President al-Asad drew its main external lessons when repressing the local protests across the country in 2011 (Heydemann and Leenders 2014). Even though Syria was geographically distant from Libya, the two countries shared fundamental social and political features: both were deeply divided societies with strong security-focused, anti-imperialist regimes that represented minority rule. Our comparative evidence strongly suggests that perceived *proximity* is a key factor determining the sources of learning. For learning to take place, the agent must take notice of an event so that s/he can actually learn from it. As in contexts of policy diffusion (cf. Weyland 2005), the geographical neighborhood tends to reinforce the influence of dynamics in other countries. But beyond the importance of spatial proximity, we suggest that “political proximity” in the sense of similar regime structures, socioeconomic structures, and ethno-religious composition can also lead one context to become an important source of learning for another.

Did authoritarian regimes primarily learn from the success or failure of others during the Arab uprisings? Extant studies on this matter posit that key decision makers, in authoritarian regimes as well, typically learn from the failures of others (Levy 1994). In particular, they are said to try to avoid crucial mistakes that others have made (Josua 2015). Our evidence partly corroborates these propositions: both the repressive counterinsurgency in Syria and the early policing strategies in Algeria can be traced back to a learning process that saw the decision

makers try to avoid repeating the mistakes of their peers in Libya and in Tunisia and Egypt, respectively. However, there is also evidence of regimes learning from success. Typically, this seems to apply when the source of learning is the country's own past – for example, earlier positive experiences of using material co-optation (Jordan, Syria) or repressive measures (Jordan, Bahrain). However, the Jordanian regime's implementation of constitutional reforms clearly followed the Moroccan script, underlining the fact that authoritarian regimes can also draw lessons from a particularly successful external source. In sum, our comparative evidence suggests that while the "learning from failure" hypothesis is not wrong, it has to be balanced against instances of "learning from success," which can occur at the same time.

### 4.3 *Structural Constraints on Policy Change*

In sections 1 and 2 of this contribution, we elaborated on the conceptual distinction between learning on the one hand and policy change on the other. There are instances where learning-induced policy change does not occur because a number of structural constraints prevent implementation. First of all, *internal power structures* are important in this regard. In authoritarian regimes with multiple power centers, such as Bahrain, the learning in one elite segment does not necessarily mean that their changed assessment leads to policy changes. The "learners" still have to come out on top with their suggestions in the decision-making process. This is quite different in personalist authoritarian regimes like Jordan, where King Abdullah II clearly dominates decision making. Second, even if those "learning elites" that can actually take a specific decision gain the upper hand internally, they can be further constrained by *regional* and *international pressures*. It is quite plausible that King Hamad would have liked to announce some window-dressing reforms in spring 2011, like those announced in all our other cases, but because Bahrain is massively influenced by Saudi Arabia and the other GCC members, which feared that their own populations would then also step up their demands (ICG 2011c: 9), these reform initiatives did not see the light of day. Third, *pure capacity* or *infrastructural power* is important too: when regime strength is limited – be it with regard to size, training, experience, or equipment – protests simply cannot be policed in the way they were in Algeria. This is also true in the realm of material measures: in order to buy off citizens, rents or other sources of income are necessary. We can observe this in Algeria in particular, where a huge part of the GDP was spent on appeasing large sectors of society and on ensuring the loyalty of the security apparatus. If structural constraints hamper implementation, it can well be that the learning that has taken place cannot be manifested in policy changes.

## 5 Conclusion

The detailed analysis of Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, and Syria as well as the ensuing case comparison strongly suggest that the respective authoritarian regimes all learned in order to adequately react to the challenge of “late riser” oppositional protests as part of the Arab uprisings. In doing so, regime elites in Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, and Syria differed not only concerning their primary *sources* of learning (from their own past or from proximate others, from the successes or failures of peers), but also with regard to the *domains* in which policy changes occurred. The latter, in short, underlines the fact that the regime elites drew quite different lessons about the “adequate” repressive, material, and legal measures. We tentatively hypothesize that the “nature of the threat” (for example, revolutionary versus reformist), as perceived by the respective regime, as well as the “socialization” or “habitus” of key elites might be important factors determining the kinds of learning that take place. Given the limited reliable data on contemporary authoritarian regime elites, especially for the context of the Arab uprisings, further studies are urgently needed. Beyond the domains and sources of learning, the case of Bahrain suggests that structural factors such as internal power structures, regional and international pressures, and state capacity can decisively constrain the implementation of learning-induced policy change.

As the study of authoritarian regime learning is still in its infancy, further research on different fronts is necessary. The concept of learning is still “overtheorized and underapplied,” as Colin Bennett and Michael Howlett wrote over twenty years ago (1992: 288). As we hope we have shown, it is worthwhile and possible to do something about this, but it is clear that theoretical and methodological challenges remain. Concerning the concept itself, there seems to be an implicit assumption in extant studies on learning that it always leads to effective adaptation and policy change. We are skeptical about this assumed “automatism” and tend to agree with Jack Levy, who explicitly cautioned that learning does not need to be “accurate” (Levy 1994: 291). As Frédéric Volpi has stated for the case of Algeria (though not with direct reference to learning), it would be a mistake to draw the conclusion that the regime “used the ‘correct’ combination of repression and cooptation to defuse a revolution, but merely that on this occasion what it did worked well enough” (Volpi 2013: 108). In future research, it would therefore be particularly valuable to take a closer look at regime elites’ misperceptions and overinterpretations, as Kurt Weyland (2012) has done in the realm of societal agents.

The analytical approach we have developed here – namely, to observe and evaluate policy change and then draw inferences about regime learning from its specific occurrence – is therefore a logical solution to the problem. But again, the procedure is not without some shortcomings. To further improve studies on regime learning, more emphasis should be put on the reliability of sources and data, as well as on methods that can better demonstrate that it was learning that decisively shaped policy change. Here, the behavior and remarks of regime elites themselves are only a starting point. More thorough analysis could try to trace

changes in beliefs in more depth – for example, by undertaking “longitudinal studies of single individuals over time” (Levy 1994: 309) to detect details that provide conclusive evidence of learning.

In conclusion, the learning of authoritarian regimes is a fascinating and complex phenomenon that is of relevance in accounting for important political dynamics, both in the context of the Arab uprisings and, arguably, far beyond them. We therefore hope to have shown that, despite the conceptual and methodological challenges, learning and learning-induced policy changes are fields of study that are worthy of much more exploration in the future.



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