

Roundabouts and Revolutions: Public Squares,  
Coordination, and the Diffusion of the Arab Uprisings

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Comments are greatly appreciated.

This version: 30 January 2013

(13,036 words, including footnotes and references)

For constructive comments, I thank Nathan Brown, Valerie Bunce, Timur Kuran, Peter Lorentzen, Marc Lynch, Stacey Philbrick Yadav, and audience participants at presentations at GWU and the annual meeting of the MESA. This paper was previously titled “Don’t be Square: Preference Falsification, Diffusion, and the Centrality of Squares in the Arab Revolutions.”

In early 2011, eighteen days of sustained protest by tens, and sometimes hundreds, of thousands of Egyptians in Cairo's Tahrir Square brought down an autocrat who had ruled for almost thirty years. This mobilization, influenced by events in nearby Tunisia, in turn inspired anti-regime demonstrations in other Arab countries. This paper asks two questions. First, why were the protests in Tahrir Square so successful in growing and sustaining mobilization from January 25<sup>th</sup> until Hosni Mubarak was forced to relinquish the presidency on February 11<sup>th</sup>? In the prior few years, protests in Egypt had become common. By one accounting, over two million Egyptian workers had participated in 3,239 strikes, gatherings, sit-ins, and demonstrations from 2004-2010.<sup>1</sup> Political parties, youth movements, associations, and neighborhood groups held hundreds of similar events over that period. Yet, that history of mobilization did not foretell the scalability and robustness of what developed in Tahrir Square. Second, why did this Egyptian example of how to sustain and grow protest spread to some Arab countries but not others in the weeks following Mubarak's departure from office? Why did Yemenis, Bahrainis, Libyans, and Syrians mobilize in ways that Jordanians, Omanis, Algerians, Moroccans, and other Arabs did not?

I suggest that the answers to these two questions are related. Egyptians stumbled upon a particular modality of protest – what I and co-author Valerie Bunce called “the Tahrir Square model” – that was particularly powerful in its ability to help citizens know where and how and when others might protest.<sup>2</sup> In this form of protest, committed activists continuously occupy the capital's most prominent square. Relative moderates periodically join and reinforce the activists, most often on coordinated days of protest that are named and highly organized, and protesters' demands escalate over time. I argue that this modality of protest allowed Egyptians to collectively estimate the level of public opposition that existed to Mubarak's regime, which helped induce ever more of them to join the protest and a revolutionary bandwagon to occur. The continuous occupation of Tahrir Square helped new opposition to drive yet more people into opposition by making the level of overall opposition conspicuous and common knowledge.

Why did popular mobilization to authoritarianism then spread from Egypt to some Arab countries but not others? Events in Tunisia and Egypt, transmitted via satellite television and the internet, undoubtedly had a psychological effect throughout the Arab world by showing citizens what was possible. But the Egyptian example also provided a specific set of tactics – where and how to protest – to publics elsewhere in a way that others knew that others knew it. Why did that model, the Tahrir Square model, resonate more for citizens in some countries than those in others? I hypothesize that in countries where the capital city has a single square or public space that the public would collectively imagine as a domestic parallel to Tahrir Square, the Egyptian example should have bit deeper because citizens would know where and how other citizens would apply that example. Protests should have been more likely to occur and expand in these countries as revolutionary entrepreneurs seized their focal squares or remained collectively mobilized after being forced out of them. In countries where the capital city lacks such a salient space or has several analogous sites, citizens would not know where

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<sup>1</sup> Beinun 2010; Beinun 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Patel and Bunce 2012.

and how other citizens would apply the Egyptian model. In these cases, I expect protests to be more likely to either not get off the ground or to remain sporadic in terms of both time and space as different groups try to apply the model in various ways and places. I identify where such latent focal squares existed and find that countries with them had a higher propensity for mobilization than those that did not. Although I do not present the theory as a deterministic one, the data are consistent with the claim that having such a square was a necessary condition for a revolutionary bandwagon to occur after February 11<sup>th</sup>. I also examine how protests arose and changed in specific countries and find considerable evidence consistent with observable implications of the theory.

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 1 examines the Tahrir Square model in greater detail. Building on insights from the collective action literature, particularly the work of Timur Kuran and Michael Chwe, I explain why the Tahrir Square model was so successful in quickly growing the level of opposition to Mubarak. Section 2 asks why that model then spread to some countries but not others. It introduces the concept of a latent focal square and the procedures by which I classify whether each Arab country possessed such a square in February 2011. Section 3 discusses results in terms of both propensities and process. It first presents the relationship between this classification and where anti-regime mobilizations grew. It then examines a variety of cases to see the extent to which my theory “works” in the manner specified by the model. Both “on-the-line” and “off-the-line” cases are examined. Section 4 concludes with implications for both the current wave of Arab revolutions and the literatures on contentious politics and diffusion.

## **Section 1 – Preference Falsification, coordination, and the Tahrir Square model**

### **1.1 – Preference falsification and political revolution**

Political revolutions are often unforeseen. Timur Kuran develops a dual preference model to explain the dynamics of why participants and observers are often surprised by such events, which in retrospect usually seem inevitable or over-determined.<sup>3</sup> Kuran distinguishes between an individual’s private preference and his public preference. The former is what he would express in the absence of social pressures or anticipated punishment; the latter is what he chooses to convey. Preference falsification is defined as choosing a public preference different from one’s private preference.

This framework, as applied to revolutions, begins with a portion of society in opposition to the existing regime.<sup>4</sup> These activists are too few to overthrow the system on their own; they need others to join them. Some remainder of the rest of society would join this opposition if enough others also did. Individuals have different private preferences: a small number are always in opposition; some would join the opposition if, say, 20% of society had; others would only if 50% did; a few would never defect from the regime (“dead-enders,” in the words of Donald Rumsfeld). The critical value of public opposition at which an individual will abandon the government for the opposition is that individual’s revolutionary threshold. No one knows,

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<sup>3</sup> Kuran 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Kuran 1995, p. 247-260.

however, what the actual distribution of these thresholds is in a society. The distribution might be such that a small change in the number of people in opposition would lead to a series of self-augmenting defections whereby each move to the opposition triggers more defections. Such a society would be on the pinnacle of revolution without anyone fully realizing it; a change in the private preference of a small number of people would be enough to trigger a revolutionary bandwagon. Kuran would say that such a status quo owes its stability to preference falsification. Or, the distribution of thresholds could be such that even a sizable number of people joining the opposition at once would be insufficient to reach the revolutionary threshold needed to trigger yet more defections.

Kuran provides an example of someone who has an unpleasant encounter at a government ministry, and this new (and exogenous) alienation from the regime deepens (i.e., changes her private preference in a way that reduces her revolutionary threshold) and leads her to toss an egg at the country's leader during an official rally (i.e., she changes her behavior to bring her public preference in line with her new private preference – she is now in opposition).<sup>5</sup> Kuran then describes how the impact of this defection varies according to different distributions of thresholds in society. His model, however, does not address how people know how many other people have defected and now oppose the regime. The amount of opposition in a society at any moment is assumed to be common knowledge, that is, everyone knows it, everyone knows that everyone knows it, and everyone knows that everyone knows that everyone knows it, etc. But, in the example, a few people witness the egg-tossing, and others might hear about it. But, how do people who hear about it know that it is true and not misinformation from those already in opposition and looking for support? How do people know that the egg-tosser is a new defector and not someone already in opposition? How do people know that other people know that the number in opposition has just increased? More fundamentally, how do people estimate how many other people oppose the regime? This is particularly acute in authoritarian settings where regimes have incentives and capabilities to foster preference falsification and prevent an accurate estimation of the size of opposition.

## 1.2 – Tahrir Square as a revolutionary bandwagon

Frequent and large protests had become commonplace in Egypt over the preceding decade. Joel Beinin described the worker protest wave since 2004 as “the largest social movement Egypt has witnessed in more than half a century.”<sup>6</sup> Over two million workers engaged in 3239 strikes and other forms of protest from 2004-2010.<sup>7</sup> Even a state-owned newspaper, *Ruz al-Yusuf*, declared 2007 “The Year of the Sit-in.”<sup>8</sup> And worker demonstrations were only one form of protest occurring in Egypt. Mona El-Ghobashy categorizes protests in Egypt in three distinct currents: 1) labor – workplace protests by industrial laborers, civil servants, and trade practitioners; 2) popular – protests by neighborhood or town residents,

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<sup>5</sup> Kuran 1995, p. 250.

<sup>6</sup> Beinin 2010, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Beinin 2011. The data are based on collective actions reported in the media and coded by the Land Center for Human Rights (Markaz al-Ard li-Huquq al-Insan). If a series of actions over a dispute in a workplace are counted as one action, the number is 2716 for the period 2004-2010.

<sup>8</sup> El-Ghobashy 2011b, p. 40.

including those by Copts, Sinai Bedouins, and farmers; and 3) professional or associational – protests by professional associations, social movements, and political parties.<sup>9</sup> The latter category includes resilient grassroots movements, such as the Egyptian Movement for Change (also known as Kifaya, or Enough), The Society of Muslim Brothers, and, since 2008, the April 6 Youth Movement and online organizers of networks of tech-savvy youth. “For at least a decade before Mubarak’s ouster,” El-Ghobashy writes, “Egyptians were doing their politics outdoors.”<sup>10</sup> These groups had diverse agendas and interests, and coordination among them was often difficult. There is no doubt that the Egyptian revolution of 2011 built upon more than 10 years of mobilization by these disparate groups, but Egyptians on January 25<sup>th</sup> did not know three things: 1) how many other Egyptians already opposed the regime, 2) how many Egyptians other Egyptians thought already opposed the regime, and 3) the circumstances under which many others would join the opposition. They knew their own revolutionary threshold and might have known their friends’ and some associates’, but they did not know the distribution of such thresholds in society.

The fortuitous coordination of protests on Tahrir Square on January 25<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> solved these informational problems.<sup>11</sup> The history of the Egyptian revolution is still being written, but available evidence and first-person accounts indicate that protesters stumbled into the strategy of continuously occupying Tahrir Square. Prior to and on January 25<sup>th</sup>, small to medium-sized protests occurred in multiple locations throughout Cairo, and groups of protesters moved around in attempts to link up with others or attract stragglers. These protests were organized by different groups, including trade unions, fans of soccer teams, Kifaya, and the Wafd and Ghad parties. According to El-Ghobashy, organizers of the January 25<sup>th</sup> “Day of Anger” changed the previously announced start time (2 pm, moved to noon) and location (Interior Ministry, moved to numerous rally points announced on Facebook) of the protest to throw off security forces.<sup>12</sup> They deliberately avoided centralizing protests on familiar landmarks (e.g., Parliament) and picked locations in neighborhoods.<sup>13</sup> Several small groups converged on Tahrir Square and clashed with riot police.<sup>14</sup> As Ashraf Khalil describes, “Just before 4:00 P.M. just as the police were potentially starting to turn the tide [in Tahrir Square], a thousand-strong march rushed in from the direction of Abdin with a huge roar, adding fresh numbers and momentum to the protesters.”<sup>15</sup> He continues, quoting a participant who is also a blogger, “As evening approached, ‘The discussion became, ‘Do we stay or not?’ People were saying, ‘If we leave, we’ll never take the square again.’ Then people started getting blankets and food,” said Mohamed El Dahshan. Fresh bodies began flocking to the square, having heard the news of its

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<sup>9</sup> El-Ghobashy 2011a, p. 3-4. El-Ghobashy 2011b.

<sup>10</sup> El-Ghobashy 2011b, p. 39.

<sup>11</sup> The question of how Egyptians came to coordinate on Tahrir is different than the question of diffusion or how citizens in other countries came to coordinate on their own squares, which I address in the next section.

<sup>12</sup> El-Ghobashy 2011a, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> El-Ghobashy 2011b, p. 41.

<sup>14</sup> There are conflicting accounts of which groups initially reach and occupied Tahrir Square. El-Ghobashy (2011b, p. 41) says, “A loosely coordinated decision was made to head to Tahrir Square.” Schwedler and Ryan (2012) cite sources that the first protesters to reach the area were from Bulaq al-Dakrou, a working-class neighborhood in west Cairo.

<sup>15</sup> Khalil 2012, p. 148. Also, see first-person accounts in Rushdy 2011.

occupation by protesters.”<sup>16</sup> Riot police violently cleared Tahrir Square that night, but organizers, recognizing that they had found a location and strategy to coordinate disparate groups who were often divided by agendas and interests, called for massive “Friday of Anger” protests for the following Friday, January 28<sup>th</sup>, to converge and retake Tahrir Square.

The rest of the history is well documented. The regime tried to prevent the anticipated popular takeover of Tahrir Square. On January 26<sup>th</sup>, downtown businesses were instructed to close before 1 pm, the Metro lines did not stop at the Sadat station at Tahrir Square, nearby Metro stations were partially blocked, and thousands of policemen were deployed at numerous checkpoints in the area.<sup>17</sup> On the night of January 27<sup>th</sup>, the regime ordered a shutdown of the Internet and cellular phone services, Cairo was closed and locked down, and major roads leading into Tahrir Square were blocked. Yet, on January 28<sup>th</sup>, protesters, now joined by opposition groups that had not participated as organizations on January 25<sup>th</sup>, such as the Tagammu leftists, Nasserists, and the Muslim Brothers, forced their way across the Qasr al-Nil bridge and down other arteries into Tahrir Square, which they occupied continuously until Mubarak was forced to relinquish power. Tahrir Square had been the site of previous protests, such as the 1977 bread riots and demonstrations in March 2003 against the U.S. bombing of Baghdad, but it had never before lived up to its billing as “Liberation” Square.<sup>18</sup>

Why was the occupation of Tahrir Square so effective at overcoming the constraints on collective action and growing the size of the opposition? The continuous occupation of Tahrir Square made it easier for Egyptians to see (and know that others saw) how many other Egyptians had defected from the regime; it made this information common knowledge.<sup>19</sup> Media outlets and bloggers reported directly from Tahrir, and several Arab satellite stations aired almost constant feeds. Al-Jazeera, in particular, covered the occupation of the square with such enthusiasm that, in the eyes of many, it became an actor in the event.<sup>20</sup> Cairenes knew Tahrir Square’s size and location, which made it possible for them to gauge how much larger the crowds were from earlier protests they had seen or heard about. They could tell that the number of protesters was increasing, and they knew that others would know if it was. They could decide if they wanted to join (i.e., if their revolutionary threshold had been met). The layout and accessibility of Tahrir Square also made it easy for Egyptians to visit and report back to friends and family members with pictures taken with camera phones and accounts of who was there and what was being said. Two metro lines meet at Sadat station, and 23 streets lead to different parts of Tahrir Square (which is not really a square, but a vaguely-defined space that encompasses about 5-6 adjoining open areas). It is a difficult space for the regime to isolate. Finally, the atmosphere in Tahrir Square, at least on some days, was festive and exciting. The constant presence of the media, particularly al-Jazeera, in Tahrir provided a sense

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<sup>16</sup> Khalil 2012, p. 149.

<sup>17</sup> El-Ghobashy 2011, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Tahrir Square is approximately 140 years old and sits on the site of a former British military barracks. Initially named Ismailia Square, it was officially renamed Tahrir Square in 1955 to commemorate the 1952 revolution.

<sup>19</sup> See Chwe 2001 on the generation of common knowledge and its role in coordination.

<sup>20</sup> Lasfar 2012.

of protection. As time went on, people could go and see for themselves what was occurring without fully committing to becoming part of the opposition.

The continual occupation of Tahrir Square solved a tacit coordination problem for Egyptian opposition groups of where and how to demonstrate for change. Mona El-Ghobashy's explanation for the Egyptian revolution emphasizes the sudden change in the balance of resources between rulers and ruled that occurred during this period: "The diffusion of protests on January 25-27 shattered both the mental and material divisions between Egypt's three protest sectors, forcing the regime to confront them simultaneously, when for 30 years it had done so serially."<sup>21</sup> These "mental and material divisions," I believe, were inadvertently solved through fortuitous coordination in one place. Even after the regime shut down the internet and cell phone communication, disparate groups could coordinate on Tahrir square because the events of January 25<sup>th</sup> had given it a focal quality.

Additionally, the continuous aspect of the protest/occupation made it easy for those not previously part of a protest sector to see how many others were now opposed to the regime. This facilitated the revolutionary bandwagon that occurred over the subsequent two weeks. Many participants claim it was their first time participating in a demonstration.<sup>22</sup> A 68-year old Egyptian describes his attitude at the time, "When the demonstrations started [in January], I thought it was just one more demonstration that would be dispersed by the police as usual. But as time went on, there was a persistence that we had not seen before. I started believing it may go all the way."<sup>23</sup> A 45-year old businessman recalled, "When the recent demonstrations started, I figured these were a bunch of kids with some signs and banners, dreaming of democracy, so I didn't pay much attention. ... And I knew from previous demonstrations how the scenario would unfold: the youth would go out to demonstrate, they might get violent; then one shot would be fired, one youngster would die, and the whole thing would be over. But that did not happen this time! This time was the exact opposite of what usually happens. ... When the demonstrations continued, I asked myself if I supported them. I have the same frustrations as the kids on the street. I know people might think I have an easy life, but they don't realize how hard people like me have to work to live the way we do, and the pressures we face."<sup>24</sup> Youth groups and social movements were among the committed activists in Tahrir Square from the beginning. After two weeks, on February 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, blue-collar workers and civil servants joined the protesters in large numbers.<sup>25</sup> Mubarak was removed from power the following day.

## **Section 2 – The saliency of squares: transnational diffusion and the urban built environment**

In the weeks after Mubarak was deposed on February 11<sup>th</sup>, protests of some size and sort occurred in all other Arab countries. Protesters in Bahrain and Yemen adopted the Tahrir model and occupied squares in Manama and Sana'a. Protests erupted and turned into

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<sup>21</sup> El-Ghobashy 2011, p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> For example, see Rusdhy 2011, p. 77, 98-99, 148.

<sup>23</sup> Rusdhy 2011, p. 181.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 192-193.

<sup>25</sup> El-Ghobashy 2011b, p. 42.

insurgencies in Libya and Syria. Elsewhere, protests remained sporadic, occurring irregularly and in scattered locations, or never escalated beyond a few dozen or hundred participants. A single Saudi protester, Khaled al-Johani, showed up for a planned March 11<sup>th</sup> ‘Day of Rage’ in Riyadh.<sup>26</sup> Why did the Tahrir model spread to some Arab countries but not others? What explains this variation in the transnational diffusion of popular protest?

Much of the early writing on the Arab revolutions has focused on explaining outcomes in particular countries, often framing the question as either “why country x is not Tunisia [or Egypt]” or “why country x is [or was] ripe for revolution.” These in-depth investigations typically identify 3-8 factors to craft a minimally sufficient explanation for why protests did or did not expand to the point where they threatened the regime in that particular country.<sup>27</sup> The goal of this sort of work is not to test or build more general theories. Often, some purported factors in these accounts are unique to country x or expressed in ways that make it difficult to tell if the mechanism is case-specific (e.g., the religious legitimacy of the Moroccan monarch). Other scholars have inductively examined a larger set of countries to identify which factors made countries “most absorptive” of diffusion. These are akin to theory-building exercises. Such studies of unit receptivity might focus on regime type (monarchies versus republics), level of hydrocarbon rents, strength of existing opposition, the nature and interests of the military, whether the regime faced a looming succession crisis, economic performance, and state strength. A few scholars have compared this wave to earlier waves in which popular mobilization against authoritarianism spread among states in a region.<sup>28</sup> Extremely few studies of the Arab revolutions have presented a deductive theory and then gathered systematic evidence to test whether cross-sectional, diachronic, or case study evidence is consistent with the observable implications of theorized causal mechanisms.

## 2.1 – Latent focal squares – defining

I hypothesize that patterns of transnational diffusion in the Arab revolutions can largely be explained by citizens’ shared understandings of their urban built environment. Imagine a Yemeni in Sana’a and a Jordanian in Amman watching al-Jazeera on February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Both are inspired by events in Tahrir Square and wonder if such a sustained and unifying protest could occur in their country. Local protests and demonstrations had occurred in both places since the overthrow of Ben Ali in Tunisia, but the size of opposition had not grown to the point of threatening the regime in either country (Saleh had recently promised not to run again for President, but he had made and broken similar promises in the past). The Yemeni sees a clear parallel between Cairo’s Tahrir Square and a public space in Sana’a, also called Tahrir Square, *and he knows that other Yemenis also would see the same parallel*. In contrast, the Jordanian might see a parallel with a particular public space in Amman, perhaps the downtown square in front of al-Husseini Mosque, *but he has no confidence that other Jordanians would see the same parallel*. He knows that the square downtown in which he sees a parallel is not the only option,

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<sup>26</sup> The BBC recorded al-Johani’s solo protest: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5v-P3mBxDRk> He has been in prison since that date.

<sup>27</sup> This corresponds closely to what Beach and Pedersen call “explaining-outcomes” process-tracing. Beach and Pederson 2011.

<sup>28</sup> One example of this sort of analysis is Patel, Bunce, and Wolchik 2012.

and he knows that other Jordanians know that there is no single shared parallel in Amman to Cairo's Tahrir Square. Jordanians know that other Jordanians might see a parallel with Hashemite Square or any of the eight circles along Jabal Amman or Ras al-Ein or Sports City Circle or the Circle of the Two Holy Places or several other possibilities. In Jordan, protests remained spatially diffuse, even after Mubarak lost power, and no continuous occupation of a particular place occurred. A revolutionary bandwagon did not occur, *and no one knows if one might have occurred given the chance*. In Yemen, supporters of the regime also recognized the obvious parallel with Sana'a's Tahrir Square, so they seized and occupied it ahead of opposition protesters. Collectively denied their Tahrir, usually divided Yemeni opposition groups were able to move down the street and collectively occupy a nearby square outside Sana'a University beginning on February 20<sup>th</sup>. It was renamed Change Square and became the center of growing protests against the regime.

What was the difference between Yemen and Jordan? These two countries are often compared: both have a history of protests, organized opposition groups, and internal cleavages. I believe the difference in how Yemenis and Jordanians reacted to the Egyptian example is in the nature and understanding of urban space: Yemen has a latent focal square, Jordan does not. In a seminal example of how individuals solve coordination dilemmas, Thomas Schelling describes someone who needs to meet a stranger in New York City but cannot communicate with her. He asked his students how this individual should find the stranger, and the most common answer given was to go to Grand Central Station's information booth at noon. That location and time was salient for those students because they thought and thought others would think that it had a tradition as a meeting place.<sup>29</sup> Schelling writes,

"People *can* often concert their intentions or expectations with others if each knows that the other is trying to do the same. Most situations – perhaps every situation for people who are practiced at this kind of game – provide some clue for coordinating behavior, some focal point for each person's expectation of what the other expects him to expect to be expected to do. Finding the key, or rather finding *a* key – any key that is mutually recognized as the key becomes *the* key – may depend on imagination more than on logic; it may depend on analogy, precedent, accidental arrangement, symmetry, aesthetic or geometric configuration, casuistic reasoning, and who the parties are and what they know about each other."<sup>30</sup> [emphasis in original]

The challenge for Arab citizens watching events in Cairo's Tahrir Square on al-Jazeera from coffeeshops or their living rooms in Sana'a, Amman, Riyadh, Algiers, Manama, Muscat, and other Arab capitals is thinking about how others in the same city and country would think about how and where the model should be applied locally. The 'what to apply' was clear and common knowledge: the model was simple and portable. But, the 'where to apply it' was not always clear; it was a coordination problem. As Schelling explains, "A prime characteristic of most of these "solutions" to the problems, that is, of the clues or coordinators or focal points, is some kind of prominence or conspicuousness. But it is a prominence that depends on time and

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<sup>29</sup> Schelling 1960, p. 57.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

place and how the people are. ... Equally essential is some kind of uniqueness...Partly, this may reflect only that uniqueness conveys prominence; but it may be more important that uniqueness avoids ambiguousness.”<sup>31</sup> People in some countries could collectively and spontaneously imagine a “solution”; others could not.

The Egyptian revolution demonstrated, via al-Jazeera, a portable example to others; the question is if those others could collectively apply it. I hypothesize that whether or not a single latent focal square exists in a capital helps explain if the Egyptian example had a “demonstration effect” in that country, if it diffused there. If a particular square in the capital had, prior to events in Egypt, a uniqueness, a prominence, a conspicuousness in the minds of its citizens, then the Egyptian example should have been easier for them to collectively apply. Existing opposition would know where to coordinate and would do so because others would. Opposition groups normally at loggerheads would head to the same place with the same strategy in mind. Citizens not-yet-in-opposition could then learn how much opposition already existed and watch as the size of the crowds increased or stagnated. They might visit. If held in the focal square, they knew the revolution would be televised.<sup>32</sup> Protests would be continuous and potentially self-augmenting if the right distribution of revolutionary thresholds existed. In contrast, if a country lacked such a square or had more than one, it would be more difficult for opposition to coordinate, divisions between opposition groups would continue, and citizens would find it difficult to estimate how much opposition actually existed. In these cases, the example from Egypt would be more difficult to apply, and protests likely would remain fragmented in time and space – staccato, and either fixated on moving along streets or divided among multiple spaces, making it easier for the regime to isolate and break up. The Egyptian example suggested that only in a single place and in a continuous fashion could demonstrations organize the opposition into a mass capable of standing up to the applied coercive power of the state.<sup>33</sup>

## 2.2 – Latent focal squares – operationalizing

At one level, the concept of a latent focal square is whether the country had a single square in the capital around which citizens’ expectations of how other citizens would see a domestic parallel with protests in Cairo’s Tahrir Square would naturally have converged before those protests in Cairo began on January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011. At a more fundamental level, the concept is focality or “imagined centrality”: did there exist a single and distinctive urban space that held a unique conspicuousness in a way that was common knowledge? It is not obvious how to operationalize this concept, what systematic scoring procedures to use, without risking post-hoc or tautological analysis.<sup>34</sup> Scholars of urban studies, influenced by the work Kevin Lynch (1960), have written about the “imageability” of city form, the quality of evoking a strong

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 57-8.

<sup>32</sup> Apologies to Gil Scott-Heron.

<sup>33</sup> This would be even more important for “demonstration effects” in states where the regime enjoyed robust coercive capacities or the opposition as weak or divided.

<sup>34</sup> It is potentially problematic to look only at whether public spaces have a history of protests because another factor could determine both if one place is focal and if post-Egyptian protests occurred there (e.g., maybe a unified opposition does both, or civil society, or strong national identity).

mental image, and the extent to which a city's inhabitants carry with them such shared mental pictures. My concept of a latent focal square is similar.

I initially considered GIS tools for urban network analysis. I used data on streets to calculate network centrality measures for nodes (e.g., roundabouts, squares, circles), but this operationalization is too concrete (pun intended) in the sense that it ignores the collectively imagined aspect of centrality that is key to operationalizing the independent variable. In Riyadh, for example, two cloverleaf interchanges (Cairo Square and Damascus Square) within the ring road have extremely high centrality measures according to several methods of calculation. Two of Riyadh's most important roads intersect at Cairo Square, shown in Figure 1 below, but the "Square" is an enormous cloverleaf interchange that is virtually inaccessible to pedestrians. It is highly unlikely that any Saudi would have seen a parallel between Cairo's Tahrir Square and Riyadh's Cairo cloverleaf or expected other Saudis to draw such a parallel.<sup>35</sup> It is not conspicuous in the way Schelling describes.

**Figure 1: Cairo Square in Riyadh**



Instead, I considered several indicators to determine whether a country had a latent focal square at the time of the Egyptian uprising. The core question I asked was: does the capital city have a unique, prominent, and accessible public space that is conspicuous because it represents the existing regime or "the nation" in citizens' collective imagination? A public space might have such conspicuousness because it was built or refurbished to commemorate the regime's or ruler's rise to power or accomplishments and is associated as such. Alternatively, it might have preeminence among public spaces because of its historic centrality or role during colonial or post-colonial periods or in the creation of a shared sense of nationhood. I examined maps, transportation networks, countries' urban histories, imagery from national television,

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<sup>35</sup> With more and better data, I could model potential travel paths as a network. Road and subway systems could be modeled as a network dataset. With population data, I could calculate which square minimizes travel time for the maximum number of people (a least cost network path from several origins to a single destination) or the "service area" of each square (most accessible). This approach, however, still misses critical aspects of the concept.

and recent currency to identify which countries had a single latent focal square in the capital.<sup>36</sup> I focus only on capital cities because that is where citizens would be mostly likely to expect other citizens to try to apply the model from Egypt. Residents in some non-capital cities, such as Hama in Syria and Taiz in Yemen, did protest in ways consistent with the idea of diffusion, but I examine only capital cities here because the theory suggests that citizens would first expect other citizens to try to collectively apply the model in the capital. Table 1 categorizes Arab capitals according to whether they have such a square (six do) or do not (10 others, counting Gaza and the West Bank as separate polities<sup>37</sup>).

**Table 1: Arab capitals and latent focal squares**

Did the capital city have a single latent focal square in February 2011?	
Yes (name)	No
Manama, Bahrain (Pearl Roundabout)	Algiers, Algeria
Baghdad, Iraq (Tahrir Square)	Gaza City, Gaza
Beirut, Lebanon (Martyrs' Square)	Amman, Jordan
Tripoli, Libya (Green Square)	Kuwait City, Kuwait
Damascus, Syria (Merjeh Square)	Rabat, Morocco
Sana'a, Yemen (Tahrir Square)	Muscat, Oman
	Doha, Qatar
	Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
	Abu Dhabi, UAE
	Ramallah, West Bank

Martyrs' Square in Beirut (aka Place des Martyrs, Sahet ash-Shouhada, or "al-Burj") is undeniably the city's conspicuous central square and was long a symbol of the country's unity (until it became the site of politicized protests in 2005, as explained in section 3 below). Its earliest known name is Place des Canons, perhaps because it was where the Russians placed their artillery during their occupation of the city from October 1773 to February 1774.<sup>38</sup> The Ottomans renamed it Place Hamidiyyeh, and it became the center of their administration and a major business center after an expansion in the 1880s that marked, according to one history of the city, "Beirut's entry into the new era of Ottoman urbanism."<sup>39</sup> It was renamed Place de l'Union in 1908-09 by the Young Turks and finally renamed Place des Martyrs at the end of Ottoman rule to commemorate the Arab and Lebanese nationalists hanged in 1916.<sup>40</sup> It was Beirut's central thoroughfare in the 1960s and 70s, a vast open bus and taxi station, and the terminus of the city's main roads and highways. One author describes it as "the hub of

<sup>36</sup> To understand the "imageability" of physical objects and places in Boston, Jersey City, and Los Angeles, Lynch (1960) used data from systematic field reconnaissance, interviews with residents, and photographic recognition tests.

<sup>37</sup> This reflects the idea that Palestinians in Gaza could have protested against the Hamas-led government there while those in the West Bank could have targeted the PNA-led government in Ramallah.

<sup>38</sup> Kassir 2010, p. 77-78.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 140-41.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 143.

automobile traffic in the city, almost impossible to avoid in passing from one neighborhood to another. ... In 1973, for example, between 180,000 and 270,000 people entered the downtown every day, for the most part through Place des Martyrs.”<sup>41</sup> Most importantly, it was a widely shared symbol of pre-civil war Lebanon: a historical picture of it was commonly found hanging in many homes and shops from the mid-1990s until 2005.

Damascus also has a focal square, Martyrs’ Square (Al-Marjeh or Merdje Square), that was long a symbol of the country’s modernization and unity. It dates from the Ottoman urban revitalization of Damascus in 1866, and several historical landmarks remain nearby or are remembered through their names. It was expanded and formalized in 1884 and soon served as the center of Ottoman administration after the construction of the adjacent Courts of Justice (1878), town hall (1894), police headquarters (1900), and civil seraya (1899, now the headquarters of the Interior Ministry).<sup>42</sup> In the early 1900s, it was the central point of an electric tramway system run by a Belgian company.<sup>43</sup> Like most focal squares, it contains a conspicuous and widely-recognized monument, in this case, a bronze column that dates to 1905 and commemorates the opening of the Ottoman-controlled telegraph line from Istanbul to Mecca which ran through Damascus. It is perhaps best remembered among Syrians for the Ottoman mass executions of 11 Arab nationalists in August 1915 and 21 more in May 1916.<sup>44</sup> It has long had a focal quality: it is where Damascenes gathered on October 1, 1918 when the city was taken by Australians ahead of the arrival of T.E. Lawrence and the Arab forces.<sup>45</sup>

Green Square has long been a latent focal square in Tripoli, Libya. It was known as Piazaa Italia during the colonial period and Independence Square under the monarchy before being renamed Green Square (as-Sahat al-Khadra) to celebrate Muammar Gaddafi’s *Green Book*. It sits at near the border of Libya’s old and new cities, and, like many focal squares, several major roads intersect there. Its capture on August 22, 2011 is often marked as the official fall of the Gaddafi regime.

Sana’a’s and Baghdad’s Tahrir Squares are latent focal squares, and not merely for having the same name as the Egyptian example.<sup>46</sup> The former sits at modern Yemen’s administrative heart and connects various parts of the city together. It is a bus terminus, and numerous government offices are nearby. Following the overthrow of the monarchy and birth of the Yemen Arab Republic, Maydan al-Tahrir was created in 1966 next to the ruling palace as a “symbol demonstrating the end of the old regime.”<sup>47</sup> The new regime tore down the walls around Sana’a’s old city and destroyed Bab al-Sabah outside the previous regime’s fortified

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 431-33.

<sup>42</sup> Burns 2005, p. 256.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 258.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 264.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p. 268-69.

<sup>46</sup> Damascus also has a “Tahrir Square,” but it is nowhere near as conspicuous in the imaginations of Syrians as al-Merjeh.

<sup>47</sup> Elsheshtawy 2004, p. 99.

palace, which would have been a latent focal square during the Imamate period.<sup>48</sup> Sana'a's old city saw many of its key public spaces destroyed or greatly eclipsed during the massive expansion of the city in the 1970s. Saddam Hussein built several prominent monuments in Baghdad,<sup>49</sup> but Tahrir Square has held an unparalleled conspicuousness in the imagination of Iraqis since its creation in 1956. Its size and centrality have long been important for Baghdadis and visitors. The best known shared symbol in Iraq for decades has probably been sculptor Jawad Alim's mural, *The Monument of Freedom*, in Tahrir Square. The monument's three sections portray Iraq's history: before, during, and after the 1958 revolution. Every Iraqi has studied it. It still symbolizes national unity and a link to an ancient history that transcends the Baath era and sectarianism. Perhaps most importantly, every Iraqi saw a picture of it every day and knew every other Iraqi did as well: the mural takes up one side of the 250 Iraqi dinar banknote that was issued in 1995 and dominated the Iraqi market until it was replaced in 2003. This image is displayed on the left in figure 2. Although one later 250 dinar note<sup>50</sup> and several smaller denominations were occasionally used, approximately 90% of currency circulating in Iraq in the late 1990s and early 2000s was this banknote (or counterfeit versions of it). It was so ubiquitous that transactions were usually conducted in 250 dinar increments and prices were expressed in terms of the number of these bills, call "papers" (waraq, awraq), needed for payment. A taxi ride might cost "four papers," which meant four 250 banknotes, almost all of which contained this mural. Tahrir Square's mural was constantly in front of Iraqi eyes for a decade, yet the Baath regime was unable to expropriate its meaning.

Several of the above focal squares were built or expanded to commemorate the overthrow of a monarchy. The only extant monarchy with a focal square is Bahrain. Manama's Pearl Roundabout is conspicuous partly because the regime made it so and partly because of its location, near the Bahrain Central Market and at the intersection of major roads. It was built in 1982 to commemorate the first time Bahrain hosted a summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the towering monument at its center is (was) probably the best known symbol in the country. That monument appears on the 500 fils bimetallic coin released in 2000. It is larger than other Bahraini coins and has the highest denomination, worth one-half dinar or about \$1.33 USD. In comparison, the royal crest appears on the 100 fils coin. Figure 2 shows the coin on the right.

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<sup>48</sup> See the map of Sana'a from 1879 in Elsheshtawy 2004, p. 92.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Makiya 1991.

<sup>50</sup> A less common 250 banknote was released in 2002 with the same front but the Dome of the Rock on the back. These 250 notes were replaced from October 2003 to January 2004 with a new redesigned currency, which Iraqis called "Bremer dinars."

**Figure 2: Monuments from well-known squares depicted on Arab currency**



Eight countries and both de facto Palestinian polities did not have a latent focal square. There seems to be three main reasons for this: 1) a monarchy was never overthrown in these countries, which elsewhere was commemorated with a prominent “national” square; 2) the timing and pace of urban growth in Gulf capitals was such that planners focused on channeling automobile traffic to neighborhoods instead of public squares; and 3) French colonial urban policy.

Rapid and planned urban development in the Gulf capitals, made possible by oil wealth, largely explains why they do not have latent focal squares. Each capital’s “old city,” to the extent that one existed, was destroyed, and government offices and royal residence relocated to new neighborhoods on the periphery. Doha, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi are sprawling cities designed for the movement of automobiles along ring roads and through roundabouts. In Gulf capitals, the city plan is a road plan. The most prominent public spaces are air-conditioned malls. Mega-projects started since 2004 have further decreased the shared saliency of any older public spaces. Riyadh, for example, grew from an area of 1 km<sup>2</sup> in 1932 to over 2000 km<sup>2</sup> today; the historical core – the old palace, mosque, and surrounding buildings – was torn down in the 1950s.<sup>51</sup> One study succinctly summarized, “Riyadh in the early 1980s desperately needed to rebuild its heart.”<sup>52</sup> Riyadh’s most conspicuous landmarks are skyscrapers, not squares. People in Riyadh use Mamlaka Tower (Kingdom Centre, completed in 2003), in particular, to orient themselves as they move around the city.

Circular Kuwait City, unlike the other Gulf capitals, does have a space that could be conspicuous in citizens’ shared imagination. Kuwaiti citizenship and national identity, in many respects, is tied to a historical event: the Battle of Jahra, in which Kuwaitis, aided by British gunboats and planes, fought off the Saudi Ikhwan in October 1920 and, in two months, built walls around the city.<sup>53</sup> Status among Kuwaiti citizens depends on whether someone is descended from one of the “original” Kuwaitis residing there in 1920, and the image of those

<sup>51</sup> Al-Naim in Elshehtawy 2008, p. 124.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138. A weak case could be made for “chop-chop” Square (aka Deera, Justice, or Al-Safa Square), the traditional place of executions between the Grand Mosque and Masmak Castle. But this location, in the heart of the old city, does not have the conspicuousness in the minds of Saudis that focal squares elsewhere do for their citizens. It is heavily securitized, and the adjacent streets are arranged in a way that would make it relatively easy for authorities to seal off.

<sup>53</sup> It was actually the third semi-circular defensive wall built around the city. The first was in 1760; the second in 1811. Mahgoub in Elshehtawy 2008, p. 156.

walls is prominent in history textbooks. Although the walls were torn down, five crenellated gates and an arc-shaped open space called “the Green-Belt” (al-Itar al-Akhdar) was preserved. But, as the city expanded dramatically after 1950, much of the 5.5 km arc was developed and lost its prominence as it became surrounded by congested roads. Kuwait is now a city of roundabouts: it had 150 roundabouts as early as 1960 (and 20-30 more planned at the time)<sup>54</sup>; it has over a thousand today. Safat Square in Kuwait’s central business district was the most prominent public space that survived the building frenzy of the early 1960s, but it too quickly became dominated by cars and had the “worst traffic congestion in Kuwait” by 1961. One study of Kuwait’s urban form concludes that rapid urbanization created a built environment that lacks “a sense of belonging.”<sup>55</sup> Finally, the symbol of Kuwait City and the State of Kuwait is the Kuwait Towers, completed in 1977 along the Gulf Road the tip of Ras Ajouza peninsula, across from the former ruling palace.

Amman has too many prominent squares, perhaps a dozen that might spring to Jordanians’ minds. Several are mentioned above. Gaza City does not have one. Palestinians in the West Bank would not have expected other Palestinians to protest against their regime outside the Mukataa in Ramallah because doing so would be disrespectful to Arafat’s memory (he is buried there) and because occupying that space is associated in the minds of Palestinians with the Israel Defense Forces’ two sieges of the Mukataa in 2002. Ramallah’s central business district does have a prominent public square – al-Manarah Square – but it competes for imagined prominence with public spaces in al-Quds (Jerusalem), al-Khalil (Hebron), and the Ayosh or City inn junction, which was the main Ramallah/al-Birreh clashpoint during the first few months of the Second Intifada.<sup>56</sup> Muscat is Oman’s capital but administrative and economic activity is shared with two nearby cities, Mutrah and Ruwi. Muscat has numerous prominent roundabouts (e.g., Darsait, Al-Mina’a, Al-Wadi al-Kabir, Ruwi, Al-Humriyyah), none of which overshadows the others. Muscat’s Bab al-Kabir Gate, the main gate to the city in 1970 and the only one that allowed vehicles to enter, rapidly faded in prominence as large scale renovations since 1970 pushed urban development 25 miles up the coast towards as-Seeb. No location in Muscat would jump ahead in Omanis’ shared mental maps as most conspicuous or appropriate to apply the Tahrir Square model.

In North Africa, Rabat-Salé and Algiers do not have a single latent focal square because of French colonial urban planning. The French, who governed Morocco for 44 years (1912-1956) and Algeria for 132 years (1827/30-1962), pursued a “dual-city” planning model in both capitals. In Rabat, the French drew a clear separation between the Moroccan quarters, which were preserved and “protected” from foreigners, and the modern, efficient, European-style cities they built for administration and foreigners.<sup>57</sup> The central colonial-era administrative districts remain characterized by wide Haussmann-style boulevards. Squares exist, but there are too many of them for any to be focal. Rabat has a prominent space near Bab al-Had that

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<sup>54</sup> Shiber 1964, p. 391, 395.

<sup>55</sup> Mahgoub in Elshehtawy 2008, p. 158.

<sup>56</sup> I thank Wendy Pearlman for this point.

<sup>57</sup> Abu-Lughod 1980, p. 144-45.

stretches to Blvd Mohammed V outside Parliament, and the grassy strip along its center could have been used for tents. But Rabat also has prominent squares in front of the train station (Place des Alaouites), Place an-Nasr (outside Bab ar-Rouah), and Place Mohammed Zerkouni.

Janet Abu-Lughod argues that the urban policies of Prost (who planned Moroccan cities from 1913-1923) and Lyautey (who governed from 1912-1925) instituted a rigid system of ethnic segregation that transformed into class cleavages after independence.<sup>58</sup> French urban policy had a legacy of a fragmented city, one in which we would not expect citizens to have a shared sense of space in the way a Schelling focal-point would need. Morocco has the additional problem that, while Rabat is the capital, Casablanca is the economic heart of the country and where much of the anti-colonial mobilization occurred. Casablanca's colonial-era urban planning created the same problem of multiple squares, such as the Place des Nations Unies and Place Mohammed V (which switched their names in the early 2000s!). Finally, the most conspicuous square and public space in Morocco is neither in Rabat nor Casablanca; it is Jamaa Lefna in Marrakech, several hundred kilometers south.

Algiers has been called "the colonial city par excellence, the terrain of many battles – cultural, political, military, urban, and architectural."<sup>59</sup> When the French arrived, they cleared a large, conveniently located space for assembling troops, called the Place d'Armes (later Place du Gouvernement).<sup>60</sup> Although that space – renamed Place des Martyrs in memory of the martyrs of the Algerian resistance – remains prominent, it also remains a fundamentally "French" space and associated with their rule. French colonial policy preserved the casbah, which became the heart of resistance to French rule. An early post-independence study of Algiers describes the casbah as a "counter space" (espace contre) that represented the oppositional voice of Algerians to colonial power.<sup>61</sup> Zeynep Çelik writes, "As the site of war, certain locations in the casbah became associated with unforgettable moments for Algerians. The houses where resistance fighters were caught, tortured, and sometimes murdered became engraved into public memory."<sup>62</sup> Algerians share a sense of important, conspicuous, national spaces, but those spaces are houses and lanes in the narrow and winding streets of Algiers's casbah. Çelik writes, "In the Algerian discourse during the early years of independence, the casbah emerged as an embodiment of the essence of Algerian cultural identity."<sup>63</sup> Protests have occurred in the casbah, but they cannot be large or highly visible because of physical constraints. For example, on 4 March 1985, women demanding equality between the genders gathered at the location where Hassiba ben Bouali was killed by the French in 1957.<sup>64</sup> A protest there could not grow. Outside the casbah, Algiers is endowed with perhaps a dozen prominent squares that were built as early as 1848 or during the city's expansion from 1896-1914 or as

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Çelik 1997, p. 1.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 28.

<sup>61</sup> Lesbet 1985, p. 39-48.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p. 47.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. 185.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 187.

one of Le Corbusier’s projects in 1931-1942.<sup>65</sup> There are also other prominent monuments in Algiers dedicated to the Algerian independence struggle, such as Makam Echahid, that make the selection of any other space an extremely difficult coordination problem for Algerian activists.

### Section 3 – Results

This section discusses results, in terms of both propensities and process. It first presents the relationship between the classification developed in section 2 and where anti-regime mobilizations grew. It then examines a variety of cases to see the extent to which my theory “works” in the manner specified by the model. Both “on-the-line” and “off-the-line” cases are examined.

#### 3.1 – The relationship between squares and sustained mobilization

Protests occurred, to some extent, in all Arab capitals in early 2011. Even Riyadh had two protests: Muhammad al-Wadani<sup>66</sup> protested on March 7<sup>th</sup> and Khaled al-Johani was the only protester at a planned ‘Day of Rage’ four days later. Some places had seen occasional protests since Tunisian President Ben Ali stepped down on January 14, 2011; other saw their first protests after Mubarak was forced out on February 11<sup>th</sup>. In only four countries, however, did protests continue and expand in size to the point where they threatened the regime: Bahrain, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Table 2 shows the relationship between which countries had latent focal squares (as classified above) and where protests grew.

**Table 2: Focal squares and Arab uprisings**

		Did the capital or pre-eminent city have a single latent focal square in February 2011?	
		Yes	No
<b>Did sustained mobilization occur and grow in size?</b>	<b>Yes</b>	Manama, Bahrain (Pearl Roundabout) Tripoli, Libya (Green Square) Damascus, Syria (Merjeh Square) Sana’a, Yemen (Tahrir Square)	
	<b>No</b>	Baghdad, Iraq (Tahrir Square) Beirut, Lebanon (Martyrs’ Square)	Algiers, Algeria Gaza City, Gaza Amman, Jordan Kuwait City, Kuwait Rabat, Morocco Muscat, Oman Doha, Qatar Riyadh, Saudi Arabia Abu Dhabi, UAE Ramallah, West Bank

<sup>65</sup> E.g., Square d’Istanbul (formerly Square Nelson) in the Esplanade Quarter; Square Port Said (formerly Place d’Aristade Briand, earlier Place de la République); Place de l’Emir Abdelkadir (formerly Place Bugeaud); Place de la Grande Poste.

<sup>66</sup> Al-Rasheed 2012

Four of the six (66%) countries with a latent focal square witnessed protest that grew in size until they threatened the regime. None of the ten countries or polities without a latent focal square saw such sustained mobilization. That is a meaningfully different propensity. Although such a deterministic claim does not clearly flow from the logic of my theory, the results are consistent with the claim that having such a square was a necessary condition for a revolutionary bandwagon after February 11<sup>th</sup>. Effective diffusion appears to be conditional on how citizens understand urban space. Having a latent focal space, however, was not sufficient for sustained mobilization: they did not occur in Iraq and Lebanon. Case studies will explain why.

But, is there an actual causal mechanism that links X (existence of a latent focal square) and Y (sustained mobilization)? I examine this through in-depth investigations of several cases from the above universe. I select a mix of the equivalent of “on-the-line” and “off-the-line” cases. The former are the 14 cases that table 2 suggests are well-explained by the argument: those in the upper left and lower right boxes. The latter are the 2 cases that seem to be not well-predicted by the model: those in the lower left box (and the empty set in the upper right). My goal is to use contextual evidence to see if the theory actually “works” in ways implied by the theory. In countries where protests occurred before February 11<sup>th</sup>: did they change their way of protesting if and only if they had a latent focal square? If so, did protests grow for reasons consistent with the preference falsification model? In countries where protests began after February 11<sup>th</sup>: did they do so in ways and places consistent with the theory? If countries did not have significant protests, did activists face challenges that the theory predicts should exist in countries without a latent focal square?

### **3.2 – “On the line” cases where protests occurred**

Mass protests erupted in Bahrain in December 1994 and continued for several years. Fred Lawson documented and offered an explanation for changes in the tactics that protesters used over that time: shifting from collective formal petitions to street demonstrations to arson and bombings to large scale demonstrations and coordinated protests. The latter rapidly lost momentum in late 1999, and the uprising ended.<sup>67</sup> Protesters during that period focused on mosques; took over or attacked police stations, post offices, and government offices; and demonstrated outside the U.S. ambassador’s residence and other locations. What they did not do during the 1994-1999 uprising was focus on Pearl Roundabout or attempt continuous sit-ins.

After Mubarak stepped down from office on February 11, 2011, two Bahraini protesters were killed during and after activists organized a “Day of Rage.” Instead of resorting to tactics and repertoires used in the uprisings of the 1990s, tens of thousands of Bahraini protesters descended on Pearl Roundabout on February 15<sup>th</sup> and immediately set up tents and a platform in ways clearly reminiscent of the sustained occupation that they had seen and knew others had seen in Cairo’s Tahrir Square. More protesters joined them on the 16<sup>th</sup>. The regime, understanding what was occurring, responded by violently raiding the protesters’ camp and clearing the square early on the morning of the 17<sup>th</sup>, killing four protesters and wounding

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<sup>67</sup> Lawson 2004.

hundreds. But protesters remained collectively fixated on Pearl Roundabout and tried to retake it. They finally did so on February 19<sup>th</sup>, when security forces withdrew, and reestablished their camp. The size of the crowds grew over the following days in ways consistent with the Tahrir Square model: committed activists remained day-and-night, and enormous crowds of tens or even hundreds of thousands joined them during highly organized protests. Protesters' demands escalated, and some began to call for the removal of the Prime Minister and a few called for the abdication of the monarchy. On March 13<sup>th</sup>, Bahraini security forces violently cleared Pearl Roundabout, destroyed the camp, and tore down the monument on March 18<sup>th</sup>. Since that time, the area around Pearl Roundabout has become a maze of checkpoints and barriers that prevent pedestrian access to the area. Protesters in Bahrain never found another site to replace Pearl Roundabout. The regime removed the 500 fils coin from circulation; it is no longer legal tender in Bahrain.

Inspired by events in neighboring Tunisia, small clashes occurred in Libya beginning around January 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup>, and accounts suggest that they focused on protests outside government offices. We do not have much information about events in Tripoli until late February and, even then, much of the information is incomplete. But it appears that protesters in Tripoli tried unsuccessfully to seize Green Square at least twice between February 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>. A few days later, on February 16<sup>th</sup>, protesters in Benghazi gathered at Tree Square (Maydan al-Shajara), the city's central square, where they clashed with police before raiding and burning down the traffic police station. This began the Libyan uprising, which moved from the east towards Tripoli in the west. The link between Tripoli residents being unable to seize the latent focal square in the capital and the mobilization in Benghazi is neither clear nor obviously predicted by the theory.

Damascus is another case of a country with both a latent focal square and an uprising that is not obviously explained by the theory. As in many countries, there was a self-immolation copycat in January that failed to spark a Tunisian-style uprising. A February 4<sup>th</sup> planned "Day or Rage" at various locations in Damascus failed to attract protesters, although thousands of mukhabarat attended. As predicted by the theory, after February 11<sup>th</sup>, protesters in Damascus overwhelmingly focused their efforts on occupying al-Marjeh. They were largely unsuccessful because of the overwhelming security presence in that area (the Interior Ministry headquarters is located there). A sizable protest began in nearby Souq al-Hamadiyya on February 17<sup>th</sup> after a shop owner was beaten by mukhabarat, but it ended after the Interior Minister (!) arrived and warned the crowd.<sup>68</sup> Again, on March 15<sup>th</sup>, dozens to several hundreds of Syrians began to protest in the relative safety of Souq al-Hamadiyya before beginning to march toward Marjeh Square, their stated goal. They were dispersed or arrested by security forces.<sup>69</sup> A day later, on March 16<sup>th</sup>, families of prisoners attempted to protest outside the Interior Ministry on al-Marjeh, but, once again, were quickly arrested.<sup>70</sup> Finally, dozens of protesters demonstrated on

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<sup>68</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qDHLsU-ik\\_Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qDHLsU-ik_Y)

<sup>69</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFmM2o5OrwQ>

<sup>70</sup> <http://katiepaul.tumblr.com/post/3900162085/the-view-from-marjeh-square>

March 25<sup>th</sup> in al-Marjeh and can be seen climbing on the well-known column in YouTube clips,<sup>71</sup> but they were apparently unable to hold it long enough for sufficient others to join them. Ultimately, the Syrian uprising began when protesters in Deraa and Homs provoked regime violence (partly in those cities' central squares<sup>72</sup>) that, consistent with Kuran's model, shifted private opinion and altered the threshold sequence. In both Libya and Syria, attempted mobilization in the central square was blocked, but activity occurred elsewhere.

### 3.3 - "On the line" cases where protests did not grow

Protests occurred in a number of the countries without a latent focal square, but in these cases protests remained fragmented in time and space. They did not continuously occupy a particular square and mostly relied on rallying at organized locations and moving along streets. Divisions between opposition groups remained considerable and detrimental to scaling efforts. Citizens in these countries had no way to reliably estimate how much opposition existed, and a revolutionary bandwagon did not begin in any of them.

Protests in Jordan have induced considerable change in policy and even governance structure in recent decades, such as protests in 1989 and, more recently, anti-austerity protests. An active opposition exists, and mobilization through professional associations and trade unions is common. Yet, without a latent focal square, Jordanians protested in numerous sites in early 2011. For years, the Jordanian Islamic Movement and the Opposition Parties' Higher Coordination Committee, which consists of the Movement's political wing and several allied leftist parties, have held regular demonstrations in downtown Amman on Fridays. These protests begin at the al-Hussein Mosque after congregational prayers and slowly move down King Talal Street to an open space near the Jordan Museum and Ras al-Ein Square, not far from the Municipality building. These demonstrations are approved by the government, and it is widely believed that the security services approve their signs and slogans in advance. A picture of the king is always carried in front of the protest. The Muslim Brothers have a single, well-known truck that distributes flags and banners at the beginning of the route and provides the megaphone and amplification system at the brief rally at the end. It picks up the flags afterwards. These demonstrations rarely attract more than a few hundred participants and usually focus on external events, although tens of thousand might attend when Jordanians believe that the Dome of the Rock is under imminent threat. Jordanians who might have wanted to change the regime did not coordinate on these "regularized" protests after the Tunisian or Egyptian example because they probably saw them as co-opted by the regime or closely affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and its political wing, the Islamic Action Front Party.<sup>73</sup> After the fall of Ben Ali, the Islamic Movement initially focused on those regularized protests. In the following weeks, trade unions, internet activists, and student groups organized various protests outside parliament and demonstrations outside embassies. There was no clear locus of protest until March 24<sup>th</sup>, when protesters called for a Tahrir-style occupation of Interior

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<sup>71</sup> <http://youtu.be/lhPmZKAHOOM>

<sup>72</sup> Protesters in Homs renamed that city's Clocktower Square to Tahrir Square.

<sup>73</sup> On "regularized" and "scripted" protests in Jordan, see Schwedler and King 2012 and Schwedler's book manuscript on protests in Jordan.

Ministry Circle and were quickly confronted and dispersed by regime supporters, abetted by security forces. The Jordanian case is consistent with my argument. Jordan is one of the easiest countries in the region in which to organize and to hear about protests. Yet, protesters and opposition groups could not coordinate their efforts in time and space, even after the Egyptian example, in a way that Jordanians could learn how many other actually opposed the regime.

Without a focal square, protests in Morocco have been dispersed in time and space, not just across locations in Rabat, but also across cities. Since at least the bread riots of the 1980s, most protests in Morocco have been marches that moved along major avenues or boulevards. This lack of focus on public squares, and any one in particular, continues to characterize Moroccan protests, despite the cogency of the Egyptian example. In Rabat, groups typically meet in small, local public squares with the explicit intention to march to various locations, most often toward parliament where a short sit-in is held outside. Protests, especially sit-ins, disperse quickly when the number of participants does not increase quickly enough. Perhaps frustrated with the lack of progress in growing the opposition, the February 20<sup>th</sup> movement once called for an open-ended sit-in at Place Mohammed V, which they renamed “Place L’Hmam” for the occasion. The sit-in lasted fewer than 12 hours, and protesters disbanded. Later, in May, they staged an unsuccessful sit-in in front of a detention center in a suburb. Moroccan activists have imported several other tactics from the Tunisian and Egyptian examples, such as self-immolations and championing as a martyr a victim of police brutality (Kamal Amari as Morocco’s Khaled Saeed), but these tactics have not dramatically increased the number of Moroccans willing to publicly oppose the regime. Despite continuing for over a year, protesters in Morocco have been unable to begin a revolutionary bandwagon.

[Need to account for protest patterns in Kuwait, where protesters have tried to create focality at Irrada Square.]

### **3.4 – “Off the line” cases**

A closer look at Lebanon reveals that it is consistent with the theory: By 2011, Beirut’s Martyrs’ Square was no longer the unifying and national focal square that it had always been. In March 2005, it was the site of pro-Syrian demonstrations and then anti-Syrian counter-demonstrations after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri. The Independence Uprising (Intifadat al-Istiqlal, called the Cedar Revolution in the West but not in the region) ended the Syrian occupation of Lebanon but deeply divided the country. Lebanon’s two current alliances of political parties and factions – the March 14<sup>th</sup> and March 8<sup>th</sup> alliances – are named for those protests. It continues to be the site of divisive demonstrations (by the March 14<sup>th</sup> coalition) on the anniversary of Hariri’s assassination, and was also the site of anti-government protests in 2007 (by the March 8<sup>th</sup> Alliance). As a symbol of division in the minds of Lebanese, we would not expect it to be the site of unifying protests. Consistent with the argument, no sustained and scalable protests in Lebanon occurred after the Egyptian example.

No significant protests occurred in Iraq before Mubarak stepped down, but protesters in Baghdad focused persistently and repeatedly on demonstrating in Tahrir Square afterwards. A planned “Day of Rage” on February 25<sup>th</sup> targeted the square. Despite a virtual lockdown of

Baghdad, one to five thousand protesters marched towards it. Iraqi soldiers had encircled Tahrir Square with razor wire, banned vehicles, blocked roads, and deployed thousands of riot police near the square. Protesters clashed with police and tore down concrete blast walls, but they did not make it into the square in large numbers.<sup>74</sup> A military curfew was imposed until the following day. In the following weeks, protesters in Baghdad held or tried to hold many protests in Tahrir Square, such as on March 7<sup>th</sup>, March 11<sup>th</sup>, and March 24<sup>th</sup>. They were often denied access to the square, but, just as often, several hundred seemed to reach it and protest, such as on March 11<sup>th</sup>. When they did, media outlets were not allowed to provide live coverage, but news inevitably trickled out. To the protesters' dismay, the size of the crowds in Baghdad's Tahrir Square never grew beyond a few hundred or low thousands. By May, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a mocking story about Baghdad's weekly "day of rage." Describing protests in Tahrir, it said, "The square resembles a sleepy town where a few hundred people gather for an event because they have nowhere else to go. ... Soldiers and police, who beat demonstrators in the protests' early weeks, now look bored, tapping their fingers and counting the minutes until they get the order to leave."<sup>75</sup>

What happened in Iraq? It seems clear that Iraq did not have a distribution of revolutionary thresholds that was sufficient for a revolutionary bandwagon to begin. Not enough Iraqis want to overthrow their regime, even among the several thousand who turned out. One of the protesters who made it into Tahrir Square on February 25<sup>th</sup> was quoted as saying, "We don't want to change the government, because we elected them, but we want them to get to work! We want them to enforce justice, we want them to fix the roads, we want them to fix the electricity, we want them to fix the water."<sup>76</sup> The attitude is perhaps best captured by a joke that went around Baghdad at the time: if an Iraqi were to set himself on fire in a gesture of protest, Iraqis freezing without electricity in the winter chill would merely gather around to warm themselves. It would take shift, perhaps a large shift, in private preferences for Iraq to have a threshold sequence that could be self-augmenting. The Iraqi and Lebanese cases, therefore, are actually well-explained by the theory, despite appearing as an "off-the-line" cases in table 2.

#### **Section 4 – Conclusion and implications**

Numerous analysts and commentators have noted that Arab republics have been more susceptible to protests or "contagion" than the region's monarchies during this wave of popular protest. Most commentators suggest this has to do with the legitimacy of monarchies or the oil resources they tend to enjoy. This paper offers an alternative explanation to that purported relationship: republics and monarchies tend to have different spatial layouts. Some of the republics were once monarchies, and, when those monarchies were overthrown, large public squares were built or expanded to commemorate the nation. It is the existence of these focal squares that makes republics – and only those republics that were once monarchies (Libya, Yemen, Iraq) – susceptible to protest. Those republics that were never monarchies (Algeria)

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<sup>74</sup> Healy and Schmidt 2011.

<sup>75</sup> Parker and Salman 2011.

<sup>76</sup> AFP/Reuters. 2011. "Protesters killed in Iraq Day of Rage rallies." February 25<sup>th</sup>.

never built focal squares and, hence, have not been susceptible to protest.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, the one monarchy with a focal square (Bahrain) has been susceptible; the others have not. Oil wealth may matter, but not in the way existing explanations posit (which is assumed to be an ability to “buy off” discontent with largesse). Post-1973 oil wealth shaped how capital cities were planned and developed; it led to cities without focal squares because planners built sprawling cities focused on the movement of people in private automobiles. In other words, the theory developed here not only explains the previously-noted difference between republics and monarchies, it can also account for variation among republic and among monarchies.

Several critiques of the argument can be anticipated. First, this paper does not advocate geographic determinism. It is not only the layout of cities that matters; it is just as important to understand how citizens collectively understand and imagine elements of that urban built environment. That understanding can change, as the example of Beirut’s Martyrs’ Square demonstrates. How can it be geographic determinism if the theory is built on micro-foundations rooted in information theory? Second, social movement scholars might suggest my focus on trees misses the wider forest: the attention to the Tahrir Square model ignores other tactics, repertoires, and modes of diffusion that might link protests in Tunisia and Egypt to protests elsewhere. I think the research design pursued here demonstrates how powerful a focus on one tree can be. Studies of diffusion, or at least those I am familiar with, tend to make the unit of analysis an “episode of contention” and then focus on the mechanisms that made it a revolution, a civil war, a series of protests, or something else. Cases of non-diffusion are often ignored, and it is often difficult to make reasonable conjectures about diffusion that can be coded ex-ante. This paper is based on microfoundations that the diffusion literature too often ignores.

The Arab uprisings offer important puzzles for students of both contentious politics and international diffusion. For the former, the key question is how publics in these authoritarian regimes are able to surmount formidable constraints on collective action. For the latter, questions include what is spreading across borders, why it is able to spread (e.g., portability and local receptivity), and finally what explains the uneven geography of where it spreads. This paper highlights the particular characteristics of the Tahrir Square model of protest that allowed Egyptians to overcome local constraints to collective action and for that example to be transnationally portable. It emphasizes the importance of shared understandings of public space to account for the receptivity of that particular model in other countries. Also, because Tahrir Square was the model of how to protest, it enabled protests in some places. But, it also constrained the revolutionary potential of the Arab Spring; it made uprisings elsewhere less flexible. Already mobilized by the Tahrir model, the destruction of Pearl Roundabout counterintuitively freed the opposition in Bahrain and allowed them to become more diffuse and spread out, which helped them continue the uprising after the Saudi intervention. This constraining aspect of diffusion has been underexplored in the literature.

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<sup>77</sup> The West Bank and Gaza also fit here, although the West Bank was part of a monarchy from 1948-1967 and Gaza was part of one from 1948-1952. Neither was a capital.

Three more implications. First, French colonial urban planning continues to have an impact decades later on the ability of Moroccans and Algerians to collectively mobilize. That finding could have implications for differences in development and collective action in various post-colonial societies. Since the French planned some cities and not others, there are opportunities for within-country variation. Second, this study suggests that we and citizens in Bahrain, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria already know if their societies have a distribution of revolutionary thresholds that make them primed for change. But, we and citizens in Lebanon the ten places without a focal square have not learned much (or anything) about the amount of preference falsification and distribution of revolutionary thresholds in those societies. They have not even had an opportunity to clearly see the size of the existing opposition. The implication is that some of those societies – including Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Algeria, Oman, and others – could still witness a revolutionary bandwagon if either protesters find another way to coordinate or a small shift in private opinion (perhaps caused by violence) triggers a self-augmenting bandwagon. The so-called “Arab Spring” did not have a chance to begin in 11 places, and it might yet. Finally, the role of central urban squares in mobilization is well documented in particular cases. Jan Palach’s self-immolation in Wenceslas Square in 1969 to protest the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia was the triggering event for widespread popular mobilization to the return of hard-line communist rule. The focal city of Tiananmen Square was critical for protests in China in 1989. Kuran and others have emphasized the importance of the regular Monday protests in Karl Marx Square in Leipzig in 1989-1990, and Maidan Nezalezhnosti was focal in Kiev’s Orange Revolution in 2004-05. What we do not know, however, is how critical the existence of such squares are for mobilization and the conditions under which they matter. This suggests a larger project, focused on the cross-national study of urban spaces, collective understandings of those urban spaces, and collective action. Such a project would likely combine history, GIS analysis, and ethnography.

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