



Legitimation, regime survival, and shifting alliances in the Arab League: Explaining sanction politics during the Arab Spring

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Abstract

The Arab Spring marks a puzzling shift in the sanction politics of the Arab League: for the first time, the Arab League suspended member states for matters of internal affairs by majority vote. This article argues that survival politics can explain the changing sanction politics of the Arab League. To re-legitimize rule during this unprecedented moment, member states selectively supported some protest movements to signal their understanding of public demands for change without committing to domestic reform. Contrasting case studies of the Arab League's suspension of Libya and Syria and its simultaneous support for military intervention against protestors in Bahrain illustrate how concerns for regime legitimation and a short-lived alliance between Saudi Arabia and Qatar contributed to the sanctioning decisions. The Arab League can thus be considered a case of negative democracy protection, where regional sanctions are employed to selectively preserve authoritarian rule.

Keywords

International sanctions, Arab League, Arab Spring, survival politics, legitimation, Regional Organizations

Introduction

The Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 briefly raised hopes for democratization in a region characterized by entrenched authoritarian rule. At the height of the popular revolts, on February 22, 2011, the League of Arab States (LAS) formally suspended Libya under the rule of Muammar Gaddafi at an emergency meeting in Cairo and called upon the UN Security Council to issue a no-fly zone in March. In November 2011, the League suspended Syria and finally announced targeted sanctions against Syrian officials later that month. To this day, Syria has not been formally readmitted into

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the League. This was a puzzling change in sanction politics, since the League had so far abstained from issuing sanctions against its member states for matters pertaining to domestic affairs. It had previously only banned Egypt in 1979 following the Camp David peace accords with Israel, but had never sanctioned a member state because of actions taken against citizens within its own borders. Indeed, non-interference and sovereignty can be considered founding principles of the League's core identity.

The League does not have a formal democracy clause that allows for the suspension of member states in order to protect democratic governance and human rights in comparison to other Regional Organizations (ROs) discussed in this special issue (see Palestini and Hellquist, this issue; Whitehead, this issue and also Duxbury, 2011; Hellquist, 2015). Nevertheless, at the time, these decisions seemed to suggest the potential for the LAS to finally embrace norms of democracy and human rights protection. Early commentaries argued that the Arab Spring had led to a revitalization of the Arab League and Arab regionalism in general, which explains the RO's active stance against Libya and Syria (Beck, 2015; Khouri, 2011; Korany, 2013; Muasher, 2012). While these hopes did not materialize, issuing sanctions against an LAS member state for matters relating to human rights and democracy—even though these norms may have only been evoked as a rhetorical legitimization strategy—certainly created an official precedent that opened the door to legitimately issue similar sanctions in the future. As Marc Lynch notes, 'The idea that their legitimacy rested upon respecting such global norms was now enshrined not only in public debates but in official Arab League declarations' (Lynch, 2013: 164). The suspension of two member states was thus a potentially highly costly move taken by the LAS with unpredictable consequences for the survival of remaining autocratic leaders under similar future circumstances.

Given these high costs, why did the League depart from its usual policy of non-intervention and decide to issue sanctions against Libya and Syria in 2011? Most accounts highlight the changing power relations within the region, with traditional powerhouses Egypt and Iraq in retreat and instead Saudi Arabia and Qatar both struggling for regional leadership (Coates Ulrichsen, 2014; Haykel, 2013; Nuruzzaman, 2015; Seeberg, 2016). Since Qatar remained relatively unaffected by domestic protests, the Arab Spring presented an opportunity for the small kingdom to take an active stance by using the LAS to further its image as regional leader and install like-minded Islamist forces in neighboring countries. Other geopolitical accounts focus on the desire of both Saudi Arabia and Qatar to contain the expansion of Shiite Iran into the region, especially through already well-established political networks in Syria (Hassan, 2013; Phillips, 2016). Accordingly, both states initially pushed to diplomatically isolate Syrian President Bashar al-Assad through LAS sanctions, while later supporting opposing parties in the hope that an allied post-war Syrian government would strengthen their respective regional influence. A third line of arguments builds on psychological approaches to explain the sanctioning decisions as a matter of perception of similarity that led the Gulf monarchies to only extend solidarity to fellow monarchical regimes in the region (Colombo, 2012; Odius and Kuntz, 2015). Finally, some scholars have also pointed out the unprecedented international involvement in both Libya and Syria that forced the LAS to follow suit and take action against one of their own (Phillips, 2016).

However, the literature has so far not investigated in more detail what role the domestic crisis of legitimacy and efforts to achieve authoritarian regime survival played in informing the sanctioning decisions of LAS member states. Some geopolitical arguments do take domestic politics into account to explain the sanctions with the sectarian desire of Saudi Arabia and Qatar to preserve a Sunni Middle East and contain a potential spread of Shiite influence in the region. While arguments based on sectarian politics carry well to explain the positioning towards Shiite Syria and the protection of Sunni-ruled Bahrain, it does not help to explain the involvement in favor of protestors in predominantly Sunni Libya. Similarly, psychological accounts draw on domestic politics to argue that monarchical solidarity explains why the LAS supported sanctions against republican

leaders while protecting royal rule in Bahrain (and to a lesser extent in Morocco and Jordan). This, however, does not fully explain why some of the republican leaders in the LAS supported a move against their own, thereby setting a costly precedent, or why the League turned specifically against Libya and Syria. The argument also rests on the premise that solidarity feelings exist between the Gulf monarchies which remains doubtful given their otherwise highly conflictual relationships.

In this article, I therefore want to shed light on the role of authoritarian survival politics and the involved legitimacy crisis as drivers of the sanctioning decisions taken by Arab League member states in 2011. The protest movements marked an unprecedented moment of uncertainty and loss of legitimacy for all LAS members and posed a threat to the model of repressive authoritarian rule practiced across the Middle East. Although the two main powers driving the LAS decisions, Saudi Arabi and Qatar, were relatively unaffected domestically, they were increasingly worried that the uprisings would spread to the Gulf and create regional political instability, especially after protests in neighboring Bahrain turned more radical in early March. Furthermore, prominent TV station Al Jazeera and social media had created an increasingly united Arab public sphere demanding action against attacks on Arab civilians. This particularly put pressure on Qatar to own up to the pro-democracy narrative it had publicly advanced and take action to match the rhetoric.

LAS member states were thus particularly keen to signal their understanding of popular demands to their own publics in order to re-legitimate their rule and contain a further spread of violence into the Gulf by selectively supporting protest movements that did not pose a direct threat to their own regimes. Although the decision to sanction fellow authoritarian leaders was a highly costly move, it was also a decision taken under extremely uncertain and unprecedented circumstances at the height of public protests that promised two main benefits. First, issuing regional sanctions instead of taking domestic action showed that leaders were responsive to public demands for action without committing regimes to any domestic reform promises. Helped by the fact that both Gaddafi and Assad had been highly unpopular leaders within the LAS, the League did therefore move to suspend Libya and Syria for violent actions against their own citizens. Second, the dominance of public debate around the sanctioning decisions took the spotlight away from domestic pressures especially in light of the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) military intervention to quash large-scale protestors against the reigning al-Khalifa family in Bahrain. Given that Saudi Arabia and Qatar were both on board with violently repressing protestors in Bahrain, it seems unlikely that concerns about protecting Arab citizens elsewhere from regime-inflicted violence informed the sanctioning decisions. We can rather assume that regimes engaged in strategic calculations about the costs and benefits involved in supporting one regime over another and intelligently employed a rhetoric of civilian protection and pro-democracy support to present their own regimes in a positive light.

This contribution presents contrasting case studies that show how concerns to contain a spread of violence and boost legitimation and regime survival by major Arab League member states were important in the League's decision to issue sanctions against the Libyan and Syrian governments while supporting military intervention to stabilize the Bahraini regime. In the case of Libya and Syria, benefits to domestic legitimation seemed to outweigh the cost of sanctioning unpopular autocrats for undemocratic behavior. In contrast, the fall of the reigning Sunni leadership in Bahrain would have come at an exceptionally high cost, particularly for the legitimacy of the Gulf monarchies and their style of absolute royal rule.

The article is structured as follows: after elaborating on the historical background of regionalism and sanction politics in the Arab World, I lay out the theoretical relationship between regionalism, legitimation, and regime survival. I then move on to discuss the three contrasting cases in more detail. In a concluding section, I reflect on the selective autocracy-preserving function of the LAS sanctions which stands in stark contrast to the discourse around sanctions as a means, amongst

others, to protect and delineate democracy and human rights taking place in other ROs discussed in this special issue.

Regionalism, sanctions, and democracy in the Middle East

The Middle East has prominently been called a ‘region without regionalism’ (Aarts, 1999), with its most prominent regional organization, the LAS, being relatively weak in terms of influencing member states’ politics, providing public goods, or realizing collective decisions (Barnett and Solingen, 2007). This might be due to the fact that ROs in the Global South are often products of decolonialization efforts, and were therefore created to support newly established regimes in their quest for independence and state-building (Acharya and Johnston, 2007). While regional institution-building in Europe was mostly pursued as a post-World War II project to curb nationalism and stimulate trade by transferring authority to supranational bodies, ROs in the Global South were rather built as weak intergovernmental institutions without the authority to interfere in domestic affairs (Acharya, 2016). While norms related to sovereignty and non-interference have taken various trajectories across the Global South (Coe, 2015; Hellquist, 2015), they still carry much weight in the Arab League (Barnett and Solingen, 2007). As Barnett and Solingen conclude: the League’s design is ‘the result of the clear imperative of regime survival that led Arab leaders to prefer weak regional institutions [that are] specifically designed to fail’ (2007: 181).

While the League has actively used sanctions in the ongoing Israeli–Palestinian conflict, it has no record of employing sanctions against its own member states for matters that pertain to upholding democratic governance or human rights. Article 18 of the Arab Pact to establish the League of Arab States does allow for the possibility to suspend member states by unanimous vote if the state is in violation of the treaty’s obligations. However, Article 8 also clearly lays out that ‘each member-state shall respect the systems of government established in the other member-states and regard them as exclusive concerns of those states. Each shall pledge to abstain from any action calculated to change established systems of government’.

Article 18 has only been activated once prior to 2011: to suspend Egypt from the League between 1979 and 1989 following the Camp David peace accords with Israel and Sadat’s historic visit to the ‘Zionist state’. Since external boycotts and sanctions against Israel and its allies formed part of the pan-Arab identity directed at supporting and liberating Palestine, Egypt’s political rapprochement with Israel was seen as an inexcusable break with pan-Arab solidarity (Korany, 1986). However, both sanction decisions in 2011 departed markedly from the established procedures. Only half of the members voted on the decision to call for a no-fly zone in Libya, while the decision to sanction Syria was officially opposed by Lebanon and Yemen, with Iraq abstaining. These decisions show that although the League has formal sanctioning procedures in place, their application can be highly politicized and unpredictable, and thus stand in stark contrast to the automatic kind of sanctioning procedures put in place by the African Union and the absolute adherence to non-interference practiced by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Although the League does have formal sanctioning power, it has not developed any type of formal regional measures to protect democracy and human rights. The Arab League vowed to promote democratic governance in its Tunis summit in 2004, where it adopted a purely declaratory human rights declaration (van Hüllen, 2015). The RO also has a poor record of promoting and protecting democratic elections in member states. Although it does employ observer missions to monitor the democratic quality of presidential and parliamentary elections, their ‘shadow’ missions regularly praise flawed outcomes as free, fair, and democratic (Debre and Morgenbesser, 2017).

Linking legitimation and sanctioning politics of the Arab League

Within international relations scholarship, legitimacy has been mostly addressed with regard to perceived legitimacy of international organizations (e.g. Tallberg and Zürn, 2019) and the democratic deficit of the European Union (e.g. Schmidt, 2007). While some international relations and Europeanization literatures deal with the domestic impact of RO membership (Börzel and Risse, 2003; Putnam, 1988), few scholars address how ROs might affect domestic politics in non-democratic regimes. One line of argument advanced by the comparative regionalism literature rests on regime survival as a central link. According to this regime-boosting account, ROs in the Global South strengthen regimes by consolidating national sovereignty (Acharya, 2016), increasing their international image and bargaining power (Rittberger and Schroeder, 2016), and legitimizing regimes domestically, especially during times of crisis (Söderbaum, 2011). Thus, regimes can gain vital additional resources to boost domestic survival strategies such as legitimation through their membership of ROs.

The concept of legitimacy is often associated with democratic order. However, recent research stresses that all types of regimes need to justify their rule in order to enhance stability and effectiveness (Grauvogel and von Soest, 2014). Understood in an empirical manner, legitimation can then be considered the process by which regimes offer claims about their right to rule that can result in enhanced legitimacy as an outcome. However, process and outcome have to be treated as separate categories of analysis: while regimes might offer various claims to justify their rule, to what extent people believe in these claims remains a different question that cannot be answered in this contribution.

The literature has proposed various mechanisms of legitimation that can be grouped into claims based on ideology and identity, procedures, performance, and international engagement (Dukalskis and Gerschewski, 2017). To this end, regimes strategically construct domestic narratives revolving around ideologies, traditions, national identities, or personal charisma of the leader (Levitsky and Way, 2013), they introduce quasi-democratic processes and institutions like parliaments and elections (Schedler, 2006), stress performance-based outcomes such as economic growth or welfare provisions (Ross, 2009), or become members of international institutions (Holbig, 2011) to garner legitimacy.

In the context of regime-boosting regionalism, we can accordingly understand legitimation as a strategic rhetorical process whereby the popular image of the regime is raised through reference to the beneficial effects of regional cooperation, to regional foreign policy accomplishments, or to regional identity discourses. Essentially, autocratic elites pass relatively toothless treaties, instrumentalize regional norms and identities, and meet regularly within RO structures to then exploit this cooperation rhetorically to portray the image of engaged regimes to their publics (Söderbaum, 2011). We can consequently also interpret RO sanctions as a means of authoritarian rulers to try and re-legitimize themselves by strengthening the domestic narrative of being democratically legitimate regimes that protect human rights. Since regional sanctions draw their claim to legitimacy from the contractual and voluntary relationship between member states (Palestini and Hellquist, this volume), senders can make a particularly strong statement and raise their own image as protectors of democracy and human rights when they show that they are willing to move against one of their own.

Although removing a fellow autocratic leader from power sets a costly precedent, it is rational when the potential benefits to domestic legitimacy seem to outweigh potential costs. Targeting a member regime with sanctions because of repressive acts against their own citizens demanding democratic reform sets a costly precedent for similar acts in the future. This is especially true given the fact that almost all members of the LAS are autocratic and repressive regimes themselves, and the LAS has strong rules on non-intervention and sovereignty protection that could have been

severely weakened by the decisions. However, given the unprecedented scale and early success of the demonstrations, there were also extremely high benefits to boosting regime survival if regimes managed to present themselves as responsive to public demands without having to concede too much power through domestic reforms. Therefore, rallying to protest movements that enjoyed high visibility and popularity amongst Arab and international publics offered the strategic advantage to engage in legitimation at home, but only in extreme cases where the targeted leaders had become highly unpopular and violent. In contrast, where losing a fellow autocratic regime would have accrued costs that are much higher than domestic gains in legitimation, we should see inaction or even support for the regime in power.

This logic raises two further questions. First, why would autocrats coordinate action at the regional level instead of only engaging in legitimation domestically? The Arab Spring did represent a region-wide crisis and much pressure rested on the LAS to take action. But more importantly, domestic reforms can much more easily trigger further far-reaching changes in the future in comparison to regional action, which is much less costly in comparison because it does not commit regimes to changes in domestic power distributions. Second, intervention in favor of protest movements abroad could be considered hypocrisy and ignite even further protests at home. However, during moments of high uncertainty, many autocratic regimes first resort to mock reform strategies in the hope of appeasing dissenting groups without undertaking more costly steps. The Arab Spring represents an exceptional moment of crisis for all member states, where actions had to be taken swiftly without consideration for long-term consequences. Thus, trying to showcase support for protest movements abroad might have appeared a rational first step in the hopes of appeasing protestors, buying time, and preventing further radicalization.

Contrasting cases: the Arab League in Libya and Syria, and in Bahrain

The following section elaborates on the legitimation efforts undertaken by the member states of the LAS, particularly by new power centers, the two Gulf monarchies Saudi Arabia and Qatar. To make the argument, I have chosen a similar case design (Gerring, 2007) that demonstrates how domestic strategies for re-legitimation can explain variation in political response to similar events: large-scale protest movements against authoritarian regimes during the Arab Spring uprisings. It highlights how the sanction decisions undertaken by the League against Libya and then Syria were taken during moments of unprecedented domestic instabilities and pressures emanating from within the societies of all member states and the need to showcase responsiveness at least to some demands to regain legitimacy. In contrast, the same loss of legitimacy can explain the LAS statement in support of the pro-regime GCC military intervention in Bahrain, where the costs of supporting the protest movement would have been too high compared to potential benefits for domestic legitimacy.

Based on the definition of legitimation as a process of offering claims that justify the continuous right to rule, the analysis proceeds in two steps. It first elaborates why LAS members, in particular Qatar and Saudi Arabia, saw the need to re-legitimize rule and how this might have informed the decision to sanction Libya and Syria while supporting the regime in Bahrain. In a second step, the analysis focuses on written statements and speeches by LAS representatives and Saudi and Qatari political elites to investigate how the sanctioning decisions were framed towards domestic and regional audiences, and to what extent they were tied to justify the status quo of rule. By carefully tracing both the demand for legitimation as well as the supply of legitimacy narratives surrounding the LAS sanctions, the analysis attempts to show that in addition to geopolitical calculations, domestic needs for re-legitimation especially played a role during the early months of the uprisings.

Libya

Just as the fall of Mubarak and Ben Ali had started to alarm the Arab authoritarian leaders in January and early February 2011, further protests broke out against the Libyan government on February 17. Government forces quickly responded by shooting protestors in the following days, with Gaddafi refusing to take the same road as his counterparts in Egypt and Tunisia and resign. By the end of February, an estimated 500–700 civilians had been killed, with no end to the violence in sight (Simons and MacFarquhar, 2011). While the Arab League was largely quiet on Egypt and Tunisia in line with the previous politics of non-intervention, the body quickly moved to suspend Libya on February 22 to respond to Gaddafi's continued violent crackdown, which raised fears of civil war among both LAS elites and the international community. Finally, the GCC decided to issue an initial call for a no-fly zone during a session of foreign ministers held in Riyadh on March 8–9, with the Arab League following suit with Resolution 7360 taken at the extraordinary session on March 12 to call upon the UN Security Council for the imposition of a no-fly zone (United Nations Security Council, 2011).

To understand why LAS member states opted to bear the high costs of sanctioning one of their own for moving against pro-democracy protestors, we have to look at the unprecedented level of demonstrations across the region, particularly in the relatively stable Arab Gulf monarchies that took the lead in shaping the LAS decisions. While previous protests had been directed at limited reform, demands for the establishment of constitutional monarchies were now heard across the GCC, with Bahraini protestors chanting 'the regime must fall, they will kill us all' and 'down, down with the Khalifas' (Chulov et al., 2011). Saudi Arabia faced some protests from the Shia population in its Eastern province and was afraid of a potential spill-over effect of demands issued against the regime in Bahrain. Even the small sultanate of Oman was facing demonstrations. Blessed with extraordinary resource wealth and a homogenous and small population, Qatar (as well as the United Arab Emirates) enjoyed relative calm and was barely hit domestically by the uprisings. Nonetheless, the upheavals in its backyard represented a threat to regional stability and the potential for severe de-legitimation of the type of absolute monarchical rule practiced across the Gulf, also by the Qatari royal family. Both Saudi and Qatari officials grew more and more concerned that a power change in Bahrain would have incalculable consequences for the region and necessitated immediate action (Steinberg, 2012).

Furthermore, the 'Al Jazeera effect' put further pressure on regimes to act. For the first time in Middle East history, a united Arab public sphere seemed to emerge with a renewed common identity and sense of solidarity created through (social) media (Lynch, 2013: 104; Slickman, 2011). Twitter protest hashtags and Facebook groups created a shared sense of a region-wide uprising for a common cause, and regime-inflicted violence against protestors was more and more considered an attack on all Arab citizens. This was pushed even further by Al Jazeera's constant reporting about the uprisings, particularly on Libya (and later also Syria), and the pro-protestor narrative created by their coverage (Lynch, 2013: 112). The effect of this renewed feeling of pan-Arabism becomes evident by the large-scale pro-Libyan solidarity demonstrations that were held outside the Arab League building in Cairo on February 22 (Shenker, 2011). Protestors blocked the League's main entrance and responded to LAS Secretary General Moussa's speech with chants of 'Gaddafi is a butcher' and 'into Libya we march, martyrs in our millions' (Shenker, 2011). This sentiment lasted well into March and formed the backdrop of the LAS decision to allow the no-fly zone proposal to go forward. In an unusually unified manner, the majority of the Arab public sphere not only welcomed this decision, but rather actively demanded action from the LAS both on- and offline (Lynch, 2013: 163).

In combination, these unprecedented pressures necessitated a need to actively re-legitimize autocratic rulers across the Middle East, even for the GCC regimes that were challenged much less severely compared to their republican counterparts. The relative domestic stability offered the Qatari regime the potential to act more freely towards protest movements in other parts of the Middle East compared to Saudi Arabia. Thus, the situation saw a short-lived alliance between otherwise opposing GCC members Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and in fact, a closer connection between all GCC states to prevent an expansion of regime change into the Gulf (Yom, 2014). As rotating LAS president, Qatar actively lobbied the other members present at the meeting to support a suspension and later the no-fly zone decision (Maddy-Weitzman, 2012: 74). The vote was highly contested, with allegedly only half of the LAS members in attendance (Maddy-Weitzman, 2012). Although the resolution was presented as consensual to the outside, voting had not been unanimous as called for by Article 18 on the Arab Pact, with Syria and Algeria voicing strong reservations about potential 'unacceptable foreign intervention' (BBC Monitoring, 2011). To bring dissenting members onboard and to offset the potential costs of setting a precedent for future interventions, the resolution was framed as a purely humanitarian measure to protect Libyan civilians, with the Omani foreign minister responsible for chairing the LAS meeting reiterating that Arab governments supported a no-fly zone 'but rejected foreign military intervention' (Qatar News Agency, 2011b). The fact that Gaddafi had already been isolated and highly unpopular with the rest of the LAS members further reduced the cost of removing him from power.

At home, the Libyan intervention was presented as a Qatari effort towards establishing a democratized, progressive Middle East. 'We believe in democracy, we believe in freedom, we believe in dialogue, and we believe in that for the entire region', Sheik al-Thani, a member of the royal family and former chief of staff of the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister stated in response to the LAS vote (Krauss, 2011). To support the legitimization efforts, Qatar also heavily employed its popular TV network Al Jazeera to rally against Gaddafi and paint the GCC as the champion of protestor rights (Cherribi, 2017; Nuruzzaman, 2015). In addition, LAS Secretary General Amr Moussa legitimized the LAS stance with the right of the 'Arab peoples for reform, development and change', and added that 'the Arab nations' feelings are joined together in this decisive moment in history of the region' (Qatar News Agency, 2011a).

Bahrain

At the same time that the LAS was championing the progressive developments and rights of Arab people to initiate change, it was also condoning the GCC's right to act as a counter-revolutionary force in Bahrain. Protests played out especially strongly in Bahrain's highly polarized society, where the Shiite population has increasingly been marginalized since the Iranian revolution by the minority Sunni royal family (Abdo, 2017). Thus, a fall of the Bahraini royal family would have endangered both the model of absolute monarchism practiced across the Gulf, as well as the power and legitimacy of Sunni rulers more generally (Yom, 2014). When the Bahraini regime was no longer able to contain protestors in spite of GCC-supported cooptation strategies, the GCC Peninsular Shield Force (PSF) intervened on the side of the Bahraini regime to help squash protestors and severely clamp down on opposition groups, particularly those with Shiite backgrounds.

While the PSF intervention was largely spearheaded by Saudi Arabia, its regional challenger Qatar went along with the decision and even provided some support to the mission. This cooperation can only be explained by taking into account the large costs to legitimacy that a loss of Bahrain would have represented even for Qatar. While the benefits to supporting popular movements and the cause of democracy in far-away Libya are high compared to the unlikely event of a similar movement spreading towards Qatar, the situation was very different with a large-scale uprising in

Qatar's backyard. For Saudi Arabia, further radicalization of Shiite protestors in the Eastern provinces was likewise a very imminent and real threat. Thus, for both regimes, acting as counter-revolutionary forces in Bahrain was the only rational option to prevent future instabilities in their region and spill-over reform demands. Of course, both regimes were also highly cognizant that reforms in Bahrain would have given Shiites and by extension also Iran more power in the region (Steinberg, 2012: 7).

Thus, instead of moving against Saudi Arabia, Qatar ensured that the intervention received the necessary regional support. Only shortly after the PSF intervention on March 14, the LAS issued a statement to confirm the legitimacy of the military maneuver (The Middle East Reporter, 2011), with LAS Secretary General Moussa reaffirming the importance of maintaining the rule of the Bahraini royal family by tying it to the importance of upholding the Arab identity of the kingdom and the region (Bahrain News Agency, 2011). In stark contrast to the progressive role that Sheik al-Thani allocated to Qatar and the LAS in the Libyan case, during the Bahraini uprisings, the rhetoric was much more restrained: 'We believe that in order for dialogue to succeed, we have to defuse this tension through the withdrawal of all from the street' (Los Angeles Times, 2011). Bahraini demonstrators were increasingly painted as inspired by external forces that would bring about a violent Iranian-led Shia revolution endangering the whole Gulf community, not as legitimate movements for political participation (Abdo, 2017).

The legitimization strategy seemed to have some success, at least within the Gulf. Initial protests had been carried out by a wider coalition of actors with protestors wearing badges reading 'No Sunni, No Shi'a, Just Bahraini' (Abdo, 2017: 124). However, the constant re-framing of protests as the long-awaited Iranian-led Shi'a revolution led even critical leftist opposition groups to side with the regime. Counter-demonstrations by leading Sunni religious scholars and a country-wide Sunniled boycott against Shi'a-owned business by the so-called 'National Unity Gathering'—a pan-Sunni bloc supporting the ruling family—as well as growing vandalism in Shi'a shrines and mosques are all evidence of the growing resentment against Shi'a in response to the regime propaganda (International Crisis Group, 2011).

Syria

The LAS and especially Qatar was attacked heavily for the double standard accorded to protestors in Libya and Bahrain, both from within their own region and from international actors (Los Angeles Times, 2011). Qatari Prime Minister Jaber al-Thani, without much success, tried to defend the country's support in Bahrain with treaty obligations stemming from GCC security agreements, and the necessity to 'defuse the tension through the withdrawal of all from the street and through the return of the language of dialogue and compassion among all segments of the Bahraini people' (Los Angeles Times, 2011). With the Syrian situation deteriorating fast by mid 2011, Qatar and most of the other LAS member states were facing newly rising pressures from their citizens marching in protest and demanding action from their governments. Both Hassan (2013: 19) and Lynch (2013: 163) describe how mounting pressure on the GCC states from their own publics informed decisions of GCC elites in Qatar and Saudi Arabia to engage in the Syrian conflict.

The initial decision of Qatar and Saudi Arabia to get involved in Syria was mainly driven by domestic pressure to act in accordance with the pro-revolutionary narrative in combination with a mistaken belief that the Syrian regime was close to collapse and would be quickly defeated through another international intervention (Phillips, 2017). Thus, moving against Assad increasingly must have seemed to be a relatively costless strategy to showcase responsiveness to the demands of protesting publics. This is not to say that the geopolitical aspects highlighted by other accounts did

not play a role. For Qatar and Saudi Arabia, removing Assad from power was also a chance to both contain an expansion of Iran into Syria and to establish an allied government in a newly ordered Syria. However, it also did not hurt that ‘the move against Syria won a few points with empowered Arab publics’, as Lynch pointedly observed (2013: 191). On the contrary, protestors in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East went to the streets to celebrate the League’s decision to move against Assad (Sly, 2011).

To sway the League to sanction the Assad regime, Qatar profited from the fact that it was holding the LAS presidency unexpectedly for a second round. Qatar first suggested a mediation mission in September 2011 to get dissenting member states on board (Phillips, 2016: 91). However, the Syrian government clearly lacked willingness for cooperation which ultimately led to political isolation amongst most of the LAS member states. An LAS peace plan with Assad from November 2011 was violated with further ongoing harsh violence exercised against anti-government protests. At an emergency meeting on November 12, the LAS finally decided to suspend Syria after weeks of negotiations and mediation efforts broke down. While the League’s extraordinary meeting in March was only attended by 11 member states, of which six belonged to the GCC bloc, the decision to sanction Syria in November was taken by 18 states, with only Lebanon, Yemen, and Syria opposing the decision, and Iraq abstaining from the vote. Qatar allegedly even tried to threaten dissenting members by calling on the high price of inaction for joint legitimacy with Qatari Prime Minister Jassim allegedly threatening the Algerian foreign minister that ‘your turn will come’ (Danahar, 2013: 237). In a subsequent step, the LAS followed up with a further round of sanctions targeting Syrian governmental assets and foreign relations, again supported by the same 18 member states. While backing the move against Assad thus seemed to be high compared to the initial Libyan vote, the League still deviated heavily from the official process that calls for unanimous decisions in suspension and sanction cases.

Towards domestic and regional audiences, Qatar and Saudi Arabia sold the sanctions as another instance of humanitarian intervention. As early as August 2011, Saudi Arabia called on Assad to ‘stop the killing machine and the bloodshed’ before recalling the Saudi ambassador from Damascus (Blomfield, 2011). With these accusations, Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah seemed to specifically appeal to regional sectarian sentiments among Sunni Arabs who were dismayed about the Syrian Alawite regime violently repressing the mostly Sunni dissidents. In a public statement, Abdullah expressed in emotional language: ‘Large numbers of martyrs have fallen, their blood has been shed, and many others have been wounded. . .this is not in accord with religion, values and morals’ (Daily News Egypt, 2011).

This suggests that the LAS was trying to employ a similar framing strategy compared to Libya and Bahrain by depicting the suspension of Syria as a move to protect Arab identity and with it the well-being of the Arab population. In the aftermath of the suspension decision, Assad and the LAS fought a rhetorical battle over the meaning of sanctions with respect to Arab identity (Maddy-Weitzman, 2012). While the LAS member states legitimized their interference at home as an ‘Arab solution’ to the ongoing violence (Coates Ulrichsen, 2014), Assad claimed that the League had essentially abandoned its Arab identity with the suspensions of a founding member that represented ‘the beating heart ↔ of Arabism’ (Al-Assad, 2012). In a statement, LAS president Jabr al-Thani defended the Syrian suspension by declaring that ‘Syria is a dear country to all of us, so it pains us to take this decision, [but] we want to find a solution to the problem within an Arab framework’ (MacFarquhar, 2011).

In a slightly differing manner, Qatari ruler al-Thani rather seemed to focus on the continuation of the Qatari strategy employed in Libya by framing the decision as a protection of the right to self-determination and democracy. During an interview for the news program *60 Minutes* on CBS in January 2012, he stated that Qatar would always continue to support ‘the people of those

countries who are asking for justice and dignity' (CBS News, 2012), much in line with the rhetoric used to defend the Libyan intervention. Most especially, the 24/7 reporting in favor of Syrian rebel groups by Al Jazeera helped to carry on this line of pro-democracy legitimization. In the same *60 Minutes* interview, popular Al Jazeera talk show host Faisal Al-Qassem responds to the interviewer's question on Qatar's stance towards Syria: 'What is wrong with transforming the Arab World from tyranny and despotism into democracy?' (CBS News, 2012)

Conclusion

As the analysis presented here has shown, LAS sanctioning decisions were taken during an unprecedented crisis of legitimacy for all member states. Large-scale protests across the Middle East had swept several long-standing autocratic rulers out of office and started to spread into the Gulf. Helped both by Al Jazeera's reporting in favor of protestors and the rise of social media, public demands for the protection of Arab citizens against repressive leaders and criticism of counter-revolutionary politics unified and grew louder. LAS member states, and particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, therefore needed to take action to regain some legitimacy amongst their own citizens. Thus, regimes hoped to present themselves as engaged and responsive rulers to their publics by selectively aligning themselves with the demands of the Arab (Sunni) public when it seemed relatively costless (at least in the short-term calculus) and issuing sanctions against two highly unpopular leaders, Gaddafi in Libya and Assad in Syria, in the name of protecting democracy, human rights, and Arab identity.

Additionally, the shift towards new power centers in the Gulf, and especially the short-lived alliance between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, has been another decisive factor to explain the varied decisions. While Saudi Arabia and Qatar had struggled over regional leadership before and after the uprisings, the early months also saw the emergence of a strong alliance between all of the GCC states. Instead of jumping at the opportunity to weaken its dominant neighbor by supporting the cause of protestors in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, Qatar accepted some costs to its own legitimacy as a champion of progressive political reform in the Arab World to stabilize the Gulf.

The argument advanced in this article does not imply that LAS members were purely driven by a desire to boost legitimacy to protect authoritarian rule at home. Rather, developments over time reveal the changing and manifold drivers of foreign policy decision-making by some of the major actors. By exploring domestic survival politics, this article contributes to the literature by highlighting that concerns for regime-boosting particularly informed the sanctioning decisions during the early months of the uprisings in 2011, while both Qatar and Saudi Arabia resumed their geopolitical power plays once the situation in their backyard calmed by early 2012. Qatar's expansionist foreign policy in Syria eventually resulted in its diplomatic isolation in the region over alleged support for terrorist groups in 2017. Saudi Arabia, in turn, has aimed to limit the costly precedent of popular protests in the region while trying to contain Iranian influence in Syria and Yemen. Since 2018, the Saudi regime has even embraced a major strategy change and has supported Assad's readmittance to the League to show support for a fellow autocratic leader and to further isolate Assad from Iran's influence.

Pivoting back to the larger theme of this Special Issue, the cases under analysis do show that in contrast to the ongoing struggle over the definitional limits of democracy and undemocratic political practices in other regions of the world, the events of 2011 have not triggered a similar debate in the Middle East. Both the suspensions of Libya and Syria have been enacted to boost the legitimacy of repressive autocrats during a time of extreme instability and public pressure under the pretense of protecting the right to political self-determination, democratic participation, and universal human rights. The sanctioning decisions have set an official precedent for potential future moves against autocratic leaders suppressing pro-democracy movements in the spirit of 'responsibility to protect'. However, given the meager outcomes of the Arab Spring in terms of affecting any

democratic change in the Arab Middle East, we should not expect any changes to the function of regionalism and sanctions other than highly politicized measures that become activated during times of upheaval and risks to survival.

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