# Mutiny and nonviolence in the Arab Spring: Exploring military defections and loyalty in Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria

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## Abstract
Recent studies of civil resistance indicate that security force defections can heavily influence the outcome of nonviolent uprisings against authoritarian regimes. Yet we know little about why, when, and how mutiny occurs. In this article, I ask: what factors influence the likelihood of military defections during a nonviolent conflict? In reviewing various literatures, I identify ten factors that facilitate or obstruct mutiny. I propose that two of these are particularly influential: (1) whether troops receive economic or political benefits from the regime; and (2) whether troops perceive the regime as fragile, based on the international community's response to the conflict. Specifically, I argue that troops who receive benefits from a regime are more likely to remain loyal while those who receive no such benefits are more likely to defect. However, even the most underprivileged troops are unlikely to defect if they believe that the state is strong enough to withstand a major civilian uprising. Soldiers' perception of regime strength is partly shaped by whether outside nations support the opposition, thereby weakening the state, or send troops to reinforce the regime's control. Using a qualitative comparative method, I illustrate these dynamics through an examination of several Arab Spring uprisings: Egypt, where the military sided with civil resisters; Bahrain, where troops remained loyal to the state; and Syria, where the military split. Then, to encourage more research on this topic, I use these three cases to generate additional hypotheses about defections that others can test against a wider set of cases. I conclude with a discussion of the questions that future researchers should explore and the types of methodological approaches that are needed in this field of study.

## Keywords
Arab Spring, civil resistance, nonviolence, security force defections

In authoritarian settings, political leaders often use repression to retain power. Yet rulers rarely impose punishments themselves. They rely upon the police and the military to do it. Consequently, as nonviolence theorist Gene Sharp (1973, 2008) has pointed out, a regime's repressive capacity is contingent upon the loyalty of troops. Yet historically, there have been dozens of cases where troops have shifted their support from a regime to the opposition. When this occurs, a ruler's protective apparatus disappears and the state's sanctioning power is undermined, which facilitates regime collapse. Thus, civil resisters have a greater chance of bringing down a dictatorship if they convince security forces to abandon the regime.

The significance of security force defections in nonviolent revolts has been confirmed by two recent studies. In their comprehensive research on violent and nonviolent struggles, Stephan & Chenoweth (2008; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011) found that nonviolent revolutionary groups were 46 times more likely to usher in regime change if they convinced the military and police to defect. Similarly, in a comparison of six nonviolent revolutionary movements, Nepstad (2011a) found

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that defections and troop unreliability was a critical factor distinguishing successful and failed revolts.

Defections have been important in the Arab Spring revolts as well. Analysts have argued that Tunisian autocrat Ben Ali and Egyptian ruler Mubarak were defeated in part because their militaries sided with the nonviolent opposition movement (Cook, 2011; Haas & Lesch, 2013; Hashim, 2011; Nepstad, 2011b). But why did security forces defect in these nations and not in other Middle Eastern countries rattled by civil resistance? Why did Bahraini troops crush protesters when their Tunisian and Egyptian counterparts refused? And why did some militaries divide, such as those in Libya and Syria, where some troops remained loyal to the regime while others joined the opposition? Given the significance of security force defections, it is surprising that we know very little about why they occur.

In this article, I seek to expand our knowledge about security force defections in three ways. First, I synthesize findings from the diverse fields of military studies, social movements, international security, and civil resistance studies to delineate the factors that may contribute to defections. Second, I analyze why defections occurred in some Arab Spring revolts but not in others. Through an examination of the uprisings in Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria, I argue that troops' decisions about mutiny were largely shaped by: (a) whether or not they received financial or political benefits from the regime, and (b) their perception of the regime's strength. Third, to encourage more research on this relatively undeveloped topic, I use these three Arab Spring cases to generate a series of hypotheses that others can test against a wider set of cases. Thus, the primary purpose of this article is to build theories of defections rather than test them. My overarching goal is to chart out relevant factors and dynamics in order to advance our knowledge of when, why, and how security force defections occur in nonviolent struggles.

## Security force defections and civil resistance

In reviewing research on nonviolent resistance, military studies, international security, and social movements, we see that regimes use various techniques to promote troop loyalty while civil resisters try to encourage defections. Structural variables can also play a role in facilitating or obstructing mutinous acts. The factors shaping defections are summarized in Table I.

### How regimes promote troop loyalty
Regimes typically use a variety of methods to deter defection. The most obvious deterrent is punishment

Table I. Factors shaping security force defections and loyalty

*Regime tactics for maintaining loyalty*
1. Punish (or threaten to punish) troops who are disloyal
2. Provide troops with economic incentives for maintaining the regime
3. Provide troops with political incentives for maintaining the regime

*Civil resister tactics for encouraging defections*
4. Raise the political costs of regime loyalty
5. Raise the moral costs of regime loyalty
6. Raise the honor costs of regime loyalty
7. Lower personal costs of defecting

*Structural/Macro factors*
8. Structural design of the military
9. A nation's natural resources and wealth
10. A regime's international ties and alliances

(Wintrobe, 1998). Those who do not demonstrate sufficient loyalty can be demoted, fired, or imprisoned. Chilean General Pinochet, for instance, carefully monitored his officers. Those who showed signs of rebelling were transferred to remote posts or forced into retirement. Pinochet also required all officers to sign a letter of resignation, which he kept on file; if the officers' loyalty became questionable, he activated their resignation letters (Valenzuela, 1991). In other cases, such as the contemporary conflict in Syria, more extreme action has been taken: mutinous soldiers have been publicly executed (Lesch, 2012; Owen, 2011).

In addition to punishments, authoritarian rulers may use economic incentives to promote troop loyalty. Many regimes have granted their security forces financial benefits or privileged access to (often illicit) economic activities. For example, Panama's General Manuel Noriega allowed his officers to sell visas at inflated rates (Scranton, 1991). Troops in Sierra Leone were given special access to diamond smuggling, and Angolan soldiers received revenues from their nation's oil industry (Reno, 1998; Ferguson, 2006). With such lucrative incentives, troops are likely to protect even tyrannical regimes to ensure their benefits continue.

Another mechanism for reinforcing troop loyalty is to provide political incentives. Military and police positions can be filled with individuals who share political rulers' ethnic or religious affiliation. If security forces feel that the state protects their identity-based interests, they are likely to remain loyal – particularly in socially divided nations (McLauchlin, 2010). This was the case in Kenya, where former President Daniel arap Moi represented ethnic minority groups. Upon assuming the presidential office, he removed military leaders who came from the

dominant clan and replaced them with minorities. His military largely remained loyal, therefore, because they did not want to lose the gains that their clans had attained (Nepstad, 2011a). In short, if members of a sectarian or ethnic group believe that they will lose privileges if the regime falls, then they are more likely to uphold the regime (Enloe, 1980).

### How civil resisters encourage defections

Through state-sponsored incentives and deterrents, a regime can influence the extent of troop loyalty. Yet civil resisters can have an influence, too. To encourage mutiny, civil resisters try to increase the costs of regime loyalty while decreasing the costs of defecting.

One way to undermine security force loyalty is to raise the political costs of crackdowns. To do this, civil resisters need to ensure that any repressive action against the movement is televised globally. For example, in the Ukraine's so-called orange revolution,[1] movement organizers mobilized roughly one million people to demonstrate in Independence Square. Knowing the regime planned to remove the demonstrators by force, civil resisters set up live television coverage 24 hours a day. Therefore, if an attack occurred, the footage could be aired immediately to the entire world. As one diplomat commented, 'The move was ... "the ultimate trump card" and sent a clear message: "Come and get us, but if you are going to make us bleed, it will be live on CNN"' (Binnendijk & Marovic, 2006: 415). This strategy was effective because if troops cracked down, this could lead to international condemnation, the ending of diplomatic relations, the cessation of aid and trade agreements, and arms embargoes. By raising the potential political costs of repression, the state could suffer critical losses that, in turn, might affect the military's financial stability and access to armaments.

Civil resisters can also raise the moral costs of regime loyalty by emphasizing the immorality of attacking unarmed protesters. For instance, in the 1986 Filipino 'people power' movement, almost 90% of the armed forces defected (Lee, 2009). While there were numerous reasons for this, religious morality played a role. After Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos stole an election, the Philippine Bishops Council denounced the elections and called upon faithful Catholics to nonviolently

remove Marcos from office. Moreover, as civil resisters were confronted by Marcos's troops, it was largely priests and nuns who physically obstructed the tanks (Johnson, 1987). This put the mostly Catholic soldiers in a difficult moral quandary. If they refused orders, they knew that they would likely be imprisoned or executed by the Marcos regime. However, if they attacked the civil resisters – killing unarmed religious leaders and laity – the consequences were potentially eternal. Undoubtedly, this made troops reluctant to attack.

While the moral costs in the Philippine conflict arose from the role that Catholic clergy played, civil resisters can intentionally create moral conflicts for troops as a way to undermine their loyalty. Gould & Moe (2012) refer to this as 'dilemma actions' – that is, strategic acts that force a regime to make a choice: either violently repress the nonviolent movement (which often undermines state legitimacy) or concede political space to resisters. Either way, the regime is weakened. Yet dilemma actions can also be used to put troops in an ethical quandary. For instance, in the 2000 Serbian uprising against Milosevic, resisters often placed women in the forefront of demonstrations. Exploiting Balkan gender beliefs that women should always be protected, the soldiers faced a dilemma: they could violate their convictions and attack the women or they could refuse orders (Gould & Moe, 2012). Thus dilemma actions raise the moral costs of regime loyalty, compelling security forces to question the legitimacy of repressive orders.

Similarly, civil resisters can raise the 'honor costs' for troop loyalty. In other words, they can appeal to security forces to act according to what is right rather than what they are ordered to do. Resisters can persuade troops that if they support the regime, they will go down on the wrong side of history. During the 1989 Chinese Tiananmen Square movement, protesters reminded the members of the People's Liberation Army that their duty was to defend the people, not the Communist Party (Yu & Harrison, 1990). They warned troops, 'If you dare to raise your hands against the people ... history will forsake you.... You will remain condemned through the ages' (Han, 1990: 261–262).

Civil resisters can also highlight the personal costs associated with loyalty. If troops are not doing well under the current system, movement organizers can emphasize the gains that security forces might achieve in a new regime. In the Ukraine, for example, orange movement leaders highlighted troops' poor compensation and declining living conditions while promising that a new government would address these problems along with the issue of military retirement pay and family benefits

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[1] I use the term 'orange revolution' since it has been widely adopted in the literature. I acknowledge, however, that many Ukrainians do not perceive it as an actual revolution and prefer the term 'orange movement'.

(Binnendijk & Marovic, 2006). Of course, this only works if troops are, in fact, excluded from economic and political opportunities (Bratton & Van De Walle, 1994). Moreover, such appeals are only effective if security forces believe that regime collapse is likely (Kou, 2000). Even if troops are suffering under the current system, they may conclude that there is little point in rebelling if the opposition movement is destined to lose (McLauchlin, 2010).

Finally, civil resisters can facilitate mutiny by decreasing the personal costs of defection. One way to do this is to physically protect defectors from regime retaliation. In the 1979 Iranian revolution, opposition activists helped defectors escape prosecution by providing them with civilian clothing and transportation funds to return to their families or go into exile (Kurzman, 2004). In the Filipino people power movement, civil resisters physically protected defectors by forming a human shield between the mutinous soldiers and the troops sent to arrest them (Thompson, 1995). Movement organizers also set up a defection center. As a growing number of soldiers gathered together at this center, they realized that there were simply too many defectors for the state to reasonably prosecute. This led to the belief that the cost of defecting had declined. Moreover, it likely reinforced troops' perception that the regime would inevitably fall since it was clear that Marcos was losing control of the military (Lee, 2009).

### Structural and contextual factors promoting defections

Structural factors can also facilitate or obstruct security force defections. For instance, the organizational and constitutional design of the military may make a difference. If the armed forces are largely comprised of recruits, nonviolent movements may have a greater chance of winning their sympathy since recruits are likely to identify with civil resisters and share their concerns. This was the case in the 1989 East German uprising, where soldiers doing mandatory military service were reluctant to crack down on protesters because many had friends and family members participating in the demonstrations (Pfaff, 2006). Additionally, the historical mission of the military might matter. If the military sees its role as upholders of the constitution (versus the upholders of a particular political party or ruler), it may be more likely to break ties with a regime, as happened in Tunisia's so-called Jasmine revolution (Cook, 2011). Finally, if there are legal or constitutional measures that ensure the military's ongoing position in a new regime, then soldiers may be more willing to side with the movement (Geddes, 1999). This was evident in Chile when Pinochet ordered his commanding officers to declare

martial law and annul the vote that would remove him from office. The officers refused. According to one analyst, their decision was largely shaped by the fact that Chile's constitution protected the military's power and finances, regardless of who held the presidential office. Thus, the military had little to lose by withdrawing their support from Pinochet (Weeks, 2003).

A second potentially significant structural factor is whether the nation has natural resource wealth – particularly oil. Michael Ross (1999, 2001) has argued that countries with abundant oil revenues are able to heavily invest in their security forces without taxing the population. When autocrats lavishly fund their militaries, troops tend to be loyal and dutifully carry out orders, including orders to repress. Hence vast oil resources can be a curse for civil resisters since it enables regimes to buy the loyalty of troops, thereby decreasing the chances of mutiny.

The regime's international ties are a third structural factor that can influence defections. As Kou (2000) argues, troops' decisions to defect are heavily shaped by their perception of regime strength or fragility. If a ruler's repressive acts result in international sanctions, the regime may appear to be severely weakened – especially if it is heavily dependent on other nations for aid, trade subsidies, or military support. Conversely, if other nations are dependent on the authoritarian regime (for trade, strategic military posts, etc.), then the international community may be reluctant to impose sanctions; this may lead troops to conclude that the regime's strength is relatively intact, thereby decreasing defections.

The perception of regime strength is also shaped by allied nations' willingness to intervene. If other countries send troops to shore up an ailing regime, the chance of mutiny will decrease. If allied nations announce that they will not militarily intervene, then the state appears more fragile and defections will likely increase. The latter situation occurred in the 1989 East German uprising. After Soviet Prime Minister Gorbachev declared that he would not send Soviet troops to deal with domestic conflicts in Eastern Europe, East German security forces became increasingly unreliable and entire units informed their commanding officers that they were unwilling to fight demonstrators (Nepstad, 2011a; Pfaff, 2006).

To summarize the literature, there are at least ten different factors, listed in Table I, that can shape troops' decision to defect or remain loyal. But which ones matter most? And, can it all be explained through a rational choice model? That is, do soldiers merely calculate the costs and benefits of each course of action and then choose the path that maximizes their gains while minimizing their costs?

Rational choice appears to be a useful model for understanding defection decisions. Security forces do indeed assess the consequences of loyalty and defection, as depicted in Table I (particularly factors 1–7). Yet, as Kurzman (1996, 2004) has argued, actors are unable to make fully informed calculations because they typically lack key pieces of information since conditions are constantly shifting in a revolutionary situation. For example, security forces may not accurately gauge a regime's strength because international opinions and actions can change rapidly. A longstanding ally may suddenly withdraw its support or political elites may unexpectedly resign. It is much easier for social scientists, who have a diverse set of data sources, to retroactively identify various costs and benefits; it is virtually impossible for political actors with limited information to identify all such factors in real time as the conflict unfolds. Hence troops often experience what Simon (2007 [1957]) called 'bounded rationality': soldiers must make decisions in a restricted time frame with limited (and potentially inaccurate) information. Under these circumstances, troop responses may be instinctive and spontaneous rather than deliberate and calculated (Cortright, 2005 [1975]). They may act according to what they feel is right rather than what will yield the most rewards or the least costs. As other scholars have noted, rational choice leaves little room for emotions even though emotions can heavily influence decisions and political choices, especially in moments of duress (Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta, 2001; Gould & Moe, 2012).

'Rational choices' are also difficult for soldiers to make because they may not know what fellow soldiers will do. Troops must gauge the likelihood that other military members will break ties with the state. There is a gamble involved: if only one soldier defects, that individual will be punished; if many defect, it will be difficult for the regime to retaliate and therefore the risks are low. However, how does an average security officer know what others plan to do? How does a soldier achieve some degree of assurance that he or she will not be the only defector?[2] In some cases, such as the 1989 East German uprising, entire units of soldiers spoke about their concerns and collectively decided they would defect (Pfaff, 2006). In other cases,

unexpected events may compel a few brave individuals to resist, which inspires others to follow suit (Granovetter, 1978). In the 1986 Philippine movement, for example, two high-ranking military leaders announced on television that they were defecting from President Marcos's regime. This event emboldened other soldiers, who joined the rebel military commanders. It also provided an opening for troops who had secretly desired political change but were previously too afraid to act. Thus, as the number of defections escalated, a 'revolutionary bandwagon' effect erupted (Kuran 1991), leading to wide-scale defiance and mutiny.

This overview reveals that most nonviolent conflicts are fluid and changing and thus defection decisions are complex. Thus some may wonder whether it is possible to theorize about the factors that have the greatest ability to induce defections. Obviously, no theory can perfectly predict mutiny in all situations. Nonetheless, through an examination of three Arab Spring cases (Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria), I aim to start building theories of military defections by highlighting the most salient factors that have shaped security forces' choices in these civil resistance struggles.

## Methods

To illustrate the factors that can shape security force actions during a nonviolent conflict, I briefly examine the Arab Spring revolts that occurred in Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria. But why study these three cases instead of all Arab Spring revolts? Major demonstrations erupted in a dozen Middle Eastern and North African countries, including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, and Sudan. Minor protests occurred in Lebanon, Oman, and Saudi Arabia. In a single article, one cannot capture the complex dynamics of civil resistance and mutiny in all these countries. Therefore, I employ Mill's (2002 [1843]) 'method of difference' to select a small number of cases with divergent outcomes. In the Egyptian uprising of 2011, the military shifted allegiance from the state to the resisters. In Bahrain, the military has remained loyal to the state. In the Syrian conflict, the military has divided.

I also chose these cases because they are particularly suitable for comparison since they share some commonalities that allow me to 'control' for the influence of other factors. Specifically, I selected cases where the nonviolent movement was large, including tens of thousands of resisters. Since Chenoweth & Stephan (2011) found that the size of participation can significantly influence movement outcomes, I eliminated the smallest movements.

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[2] In the rational choice literature, this is known as the 'assurance problem' whereby actors need assurance that others will join in the action. In other words, the best possible outcome can be achieved only if many people participate (sometimes referred to as the 'stag hunt' scenario in which many hunters are needed to capture a stag but one may not know in advance if others will join the hunt). For further discussion of how this problem is overcome, see Tucker (2007).

Additionally, I chose cases where political rulers had held power for similar periods of time. In Egypt, Hosni Mubarak served as vice president for six years (1975–81), followed by 20 years as president (1981–2011). In Syria, the al-Assad family has ruled for 40 years (Perthes, 2004). The Khalifa family has ruled Bahrain since the British withdrawal in 1971 (Gelvin, 2012). Thus all regimes had been in power for 20 years or more. Finally, based on the Fund for Peace state failure risk report, these three nations received broadly similar ratings regarding the level of economic development, state legitimacy, and human rights abuses – although Bahrain's record is slightly better than Egypt's and Syria's (Fund for Peace, 2010). In short, these three nations experienced similar economic and political conditions at the time when civil resistance erupted.

Although these similarities make the uprisings in Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria appropriate for comparison, I acknowledge the limitations of this research design. Due to the restricted number of cases, I am unable to test my ideas or generalize them to a broader set of cases. However, my intent is modest: I aim to analyze the importance of these factors in a small number of nonviolent movements in order to begin building viable theoretical premises about why defections do or do not occur. These cases are therefore intended to be illustrative, not exhaustive. My hope is that other researchers will rigorously test my insights against a wider array of movements in order to confirm, refine, or challenge my premises.

## Mutiny and loyalty in the Arab spring: The cases

### Egypt: The military shifts allegiance
The Egyptian uprising was inspired by the successful movement in neighboring Tunisia, where a street vendor set himself on fire on 17 December 2010 to protest the nation's dire economic conditions (Alimi & Meyer, 2011). Within ten days, this immolation had mobilized thousands to protest while lawyers and teachers embarked on a national strike (Goldstone, 2011). Although Tunisian president Ben Ali attempted to appease the population with promises of new elections and new jobs, it was simply too little too late. By 14 January 2011, the military refused to shoot at protesters. When Ben Ali realized that he had lost control of the armed forces, he fled to Saudi Arabia (Gelvin, 2012).

Eleven days later, on 25 January 2011, tens of thousands of Egyptians gathered in Cairo's Tahrir Square to protest deteriorating economic conditions, police brutality,

corruption, and political repression. Additionally, they called for the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak. Mubarak responded by sending out troops. However, instead of cracking down on civil resisters, the military defended them, often protecting protesters from aggressive police and paramilitary groups (Schneider, 2011). Then, on 29 January 2011, the military once again revealed that it was siding with the movement as soldiers openly refused to shoot at civil resisters (Nepstad, 2011b). By 7 February, 1.5 million people gathered in Cairo to demand regime change. To stop these demonstrations, Mubarak made several concessions, including a promise to not seek re-election. But civil resisters were not appeased and protests continued. By 11 February 2011, when it was clear that the military had jumped ship, Mubarak fled Egypt.

Why did the Egyptian armed forces side with civil resisters instead of supporting Mubarak? Although it is impossible to know precisely what went through the minds of military leaders, we can deduce from the political situation that their decision was, to some extent, shaped by financial concerns. Specifically, the military was on the verge of losing significant assets if Mubarak stayed in power and handed the presidential office over to his appointed successor, his son Gamal. Over the course of several decades, the Egyptian military acquired valuable real estate and numerous industries (Anderson, 2011). By one estimate, the military commands up to 40% of the Egyptian economy (Gelvin, 2012; Hammer, 2011). As one analyst wrote, 'The military has, over decades, created an industrial complex that is well oiled and well funded. In over 35 factories and companies it produces everything from flat screen televisions and pasta to refrigerators and cars. It owns restaurants and football grounds . . . . And it is not just manufactured goods: the military provides services, managing petrol stations for example' (Tadros, 2012).

Ironically, Hosni Mubarak had allowed the military to acquire such lucrative business holdings as a way to keep officers loyal (Hashim, 2011). As long as he was in power, the military would prosper; thus officers had a vested interest in protecting his regime. But all of this was likely to change if Gamal Mubarak took office and implemented privatization policies that would dismantle the military's business holdings. Thus there was a strong economic incentive for the military to side with civil resisters, forcing Mubarak out (Droz-Vincent, 2011; Goldstone, 2011).

The military's decision may have also been shaped by the US response to the conflict. The Obama administration initially supported Mubarak but then changed its

stance, calling on him to resign (Gelvin, 2012). If Egypt's military chose to side with Mubarak and defy Obama, the armed forces might have jeopardized the $1.3 billion in aid it received from the United States on an annual basis (Kechichian & Nazimek, 1997; Youssef, 2011). Moreover, according to Hashim (2011: 118), Egypt's military clearly wished to maintain 'its arms relationship with the United States, which has provided the Egyptian armed forces with some of the most sophisticated weaponry in the world'. Thus the military might have incurred additional financial losses if it remained loyal to the Mubarak regime.

Furthermore, since the United States was an important, longstanding ally for Egypt, Obama's withdrawal of support may have amplified the perception that the regime was fragile. Thus, as troops witnessed escalating civilian demonstrations, global media coverage of the uprising, and declining international support, they might have concluded that Mubarak's days were limited. As Kou (2000) argues, militaries are more likely to defect if they believe the regime is going to collapse.

Finally, the military probably believed that defectors would not be punished. This was not a case of individual defections culminating in wide-scale desertions. Rather, the Egyptian military *as a whole* shifted its support from the regime to the movement. Since the entire institution sided with the movement, there was virtually no one left in the military to impose sanctions on defectors. It is true that the secret police were still largely defending Mubarak and could have carried out arrests. Yet how does a police force arrest and incarcerate the entire personnel of the armed forces?

In short, the Egyptian military's decision to side with the nonviolent movement was shaped by economic motivations, the perception of regime fragility, and the belief that defectors would not be punished.

### Bahrain: The military remains loyal

Shortly after Mubarak was deposed in Egypt, civil resisters in Bahrain staged protests in the capital city of Manama. Bahrain, a former British protectorate, had come under the rule of the Khalifa family in 1971. In 1973, they implemented a constitutional monarchy that protected the royal family's political supremacy but also established a national assembly. One of the major tensions that immediately emerged was that the Khalifas, who dominate the nation's highest political and military posts, are Sunni Muslims. In contrast, roughly 70% of Bahrain's population is Shi'ite Muslim. Bahrain's Shi'ite

citizens have long expressed frustration that they do not have equal access to housing and educational opportunities, that they suffer higher unemployment rates than their Sunni counterparts, and that they are not proportionately represented in the nation's political institutions. These frustrations periodically erupted into protests, which were quickly repressed by the Bahraini police (Bahry, 2000; Lawson, 2004).

Inspired anew by the events in Tunisia and Egypt, Bahraini citizens organized demonstrations in February 2011. They demanded an end to torture, the release of political prisoners, genuinely free elections, and a representative consultative council. Moreover, civil resisters demanded an end to the 'political naturalization' of Sunnis from other nations. In order to increase the proportion of Sunnis in the population, the monarchy had been recruiting Sunni foreigners to join Bahrain's armed forces. Estimates are that roughly half of Bahrain's security forces are comprised of Sunni immigrants, primarily from Pakistan, Yemen, Syria, and Jordan (al-Shehabi, 2011). In exchange for their service, these recruits are granted financial rewards and citizenship.

The demonstrations began on 14 February 2011. The main location for the protests was Manama's 'Pearl Roundabout', a monument named after Bahrain's pearl industry, where thousands of civil resisters camped. To stop the movement, the Bahraini king, Hamad ibn Isa al Khalifa, ordered his troops to attack the demonstrators on 17 February. Security forces dutifully carried out the orders, killing four people in the process. However, instead of thwarting the movement, the state-imposed violence actually strengthened it as a growing number of outraged citizens – including lawyers, teachers, trade unionists, engineers, and Shi'ite religious leaders – joined the struggle. In fact, by one estimate, the demonstrations mobilized 200,000 citizens – approximately 25% of the entire adult population (Humphreys, 2011). Moreover, the crackdown radicalized the movement: instead of appealing for reforms, civil resisters began demanding an end to the Khalifa regime (Gelvin, 2012).

As the movement expanded and adopted revolutionary goals, the regime responded with greater repressive force (Chick, 2011). To reinforce its military power during the conflict, the Bahraini regime invited other countries to send security forces in March 2011. Saudi Arabia commissioned 1,000 soldiers and the United Arab Emirates sent 500 policemen. Additionally, King Hamad declared a state of emergency. Since then, civil resisters have continued to fight for a new regime but they have failed to win over the armed forces and they have not been able to oust the Khalifa family (Gelvin, 2012).

Why have the armed forces remained loyal to the Khalifa monarchy? One key reason is that Bahrain's sectarian tensions have given the Sunni-dominated military a political stake in maintaining the regime. If the Khalifa regime were ousted, the mostly Shi'ite population would likely re-establish a government in which Sunni privilege would be lost. Thus troops, who are mostly Sunni, fear that regime change would undermine Sunni political dominance and sectarian privileges.

Additionally, the Sunni immigrants who fill the ranks of Bahrain's military have individual-level incentives to remain loyal to the regime. Given the controversy that this 'political naturalization' policy generated, troops may fear that their citizenship would be revoked if a Shi'ite party came to power. Therefore, members of Bahrain's security forces have a personal stake in maintaining the Khalifa regime.

Another possible reason for loyalty is troops' perception of regime strength. Unlike the case in Egypt, the international community remained relatively quiet about the Bahraini conflict. The United States has been reluctant to condemn or sanction Bahrain, largely because this nation hosts the US Navy's Fifth Fleet and the USA does not want to jeopardize a key strategic military post in the Middle East. Moreover, the presence of Saudi troops in Bahrain further complicates the international dynamics. Since Saudi Arabia has sided with the Khalifa regime, any sanction against Bahrain could strain US–Saudi relations. Given its dependence on Saudi oil, the United States may not be willing to withdraw support. This means that the regime's strength has remained intact (Gelvin, 2012). In fact, due to the presence of Saudi soldiers and police from the United Arab Emirates, Bahraini troops may perceive the Khalifa regime as stronger than ever. Therefore, troops would be unlikely to defect if they think civil resisters will lose.

In the end, Bahraini troops had nothing to gain from regime change. But they did have something to lose – namely, sectarian political privileges and naturalized citizenship. Those factors, combined with a belief that the regime would retain power, have led security forces to remain loyal to the Khalifa dominated state.

### Syria: The military splits

Our final case is the Syrian uprising. Syrians have suffered from high unemployment rates, declining standards of living, human rights abuses, and nearly 50 years of emergency rule. The Syrian state, which is solely controlled by President Bashar al-Assad's Ba'ath Party, had historically kept a lid on protest through these emergency measures. However, on 26 January 2011, a citizen set himself on fire, imitating the immolation that sparked Tunisia's uprising. In response, small demonstrations took place, mostly in the provinces. Although these protests were quickly crushed by the military, the movement continued to grow. By late March 2011, tens of thousands demonstrated in cities across Syria. Yet with expanded resistance came expanded repression; the military used tanks and snipers to clear the streets, killing resisters in the process (Van Dam, 2011).

Disturbed by orders to attack unarmed civilians, some soldiers – mostly Sunni recruits – began defecting during the summer of 2011. One base in the northern town of Jisr al-Shughour saw half its soldiers defect (Chulov, 2011). And, as military attacks on civil resisters grew more vicious – with an estimated 8,000 protesters killed (Besheer, 2012) – the rate of defections also increased. By the spring of 2012, an estimated 60,000 soldiers had defected; that is roughly one-fifth of the 300,000 members of the Syrian military (Fitzsimons, 2012). What has happened to these defectors? Some have fled, seeking asylum abroad. Others have been publicly executed by the Syrian state (Owen, 2011). And some formed the Free Syrian Army, which is trying to overthrow Assad's rule through an armed struggle. Although Assad has managed to still maintain power, Syria has slid into civil war.

Why have some Syrian forces defected while others remain loyal? As in Bahrain, sectarian identities provide a key part of the explanation. Approximately 11% of Syrians are Alawite, a small offshoot of Shi'ite Islam, while an estimated 75% are Sunni (Van Dam, 2011). Although they are a minority, Alawites hold most political positions and disproportionately fill the ranks of military commanders and security chiefs. According to one estimate, over 90% of Syria's military officers are Alawite (McLauchlin, 2010: 341). This is due to the fact that the Assad family intentionally filled high-ranking political and military positions with trusted members of their family and religious sect as part of a 'coup-proofing' plan (Quinlivan, 1999). Alawite officers who control the military are unlikely to oppose Assad since their fate is tied to his. If Assad is deposed, Alawite dominance and privilege are likely to be lost, too.

In contrast, the military rank-and-file are largely Sunni conscripts. These conscripts identify with the mostly Sunni civil resisters rather than with the Alawite-dominated state. Thus, as they are given orders to repress demonstrators, they are faced with a moral dilemma: loyalty to the regime requires them to repress their own people. Repeatedly in interviews, many defectors have stated that they simply could not do this. As one journalist

summarized: 'When asked about why they left the army, the men say they were forced to detain people and to shoot people. These were their brothers, they say; they couldn't stay in this army and do this to their brothers' (McEvers, 2012). After realizing that he wasn't fighting terrorists but rather his own people, another defector commented, 'I have innocent blood on my hands'(Abi-Habib, 2012). In short, loyalty to the regime entailed significant moral costs, which an increasing number were unwilling to pay.

What about the response of the international community? Assad and his loyal troops are continuing to crackdown on resisters, apparently with little regard for the political consequences. This is largely due to the fact that the international community is divided over Syria. Saudi Arabia and Qatar support the opposition movement, mostly because they view Assad (and his alliance with Iran) as a threat to their own regional influence (Kamel, 2012). But when the Arab League brought a resolution against Syria to the United Nations Security Council, the resolution was vetoed by China and Russia (Griffiths, 2011). The United States and the European Union have implemented a number of sanctions but are reluctant to take a strong stance due to their concern that the collapse of the Syrian regime might lead to a takeover by the Muslim Brotherhood or trigger sectarian violence throughout the region. Thus the international response to Syria is fraught with competing interests and consequently there have been only minimal sanctions. Assad's regime has not been weakened by the withdrawal of support from its allies.

So why has the military divided in Syria? Clearly, the interests of officers differ from those of conscripts. The mostly Alawite officers are defending the regime in order to protect their sectarian privileges; in contrast, the Sunni conscripts have no political benefits at stake. But my argument about regime strength does not hold true in this case since Sunni soldiers are defecting despite the enduring power of the state. Why are they defecting when there is no strong sense that the opposition will win? Many Sunni conscripts faced the ethical quandary of repressing their own people. A number of them have chosen to defect rather than violate their conscience, even though that choice could lead to significant punishment. In short, acute moral dilemmas may lead to mutiny, even when soldiers perceive the regime's strength to be intact and the likelihood of state collapse is low.

The Syrian case also reveals another point: in contrast to nonviolent researchers' claims (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Nepstad, 2011a; Sharp, 2008), not all defections are productive for civil resistance struggles. As a growing number of Syrian defectors joined the armed struggle, the nation's internal political dynamics have shifted. Assad has used the Free Syrian Army's actions as justification for further repression, which has led to escalating violence. As the nation has slid into civil war, the voices of unarmed resisters have been muted while the influence of armed resisters has increased.

## Discussion and theoretical implications

These three Arab Spring cases illustrate that numerous variables affected whether security forces defected. In the discussion that follows, I highlight the most salient factors and generate a number of theoretical premises about defections in nonviolent struggles.

First of all, consistent with rational choice arguments, it appears that security forces were influenced by the presence (or absence) of economic and political incentives for loyalty. In the Egyptian uprising, the military had little to gain by remaining loyal to Mubarak. It was poised to lose its businesses and possibly US aid if Mubarak remained in power. In Bahrain, it appears that troops were driven less by financial incentives and more by sectarian ones. Sunni officers and 'politically naturalized' recruits feared that their religious group would lose political power and privilege if the Khalifa-dominated monarchy were ousted. Sectarian interests had an important effect in the Syrian case as well. On the one hand, Alawite officers had strong incentives for loyalty since they knew their sectarian interests would be protected by the Alawite-dominated Assad regime. On the other hand, Sunni recruits had no incentive for loyalty since they knew that their religious group would continue to face economic and social discrimination if Assad retained power. Not surprisingly, then, many Sunni recruits have defected while the Alawite officers have supported the regime. On this basis, I propose the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1:* The military as an institution will side with civil resisters if it perceives that regime persistence will harm the military's financial, material, or power base.

*Hypothesis 2:* In stratified societies where the regime is dominated by and privileges one particular ethnic or sectarian group, individual security force members will remain loyal if they are members of that privileged group. Security force members who are part of an underprivileged group are less likely to remain loyal.

Yet a closer look at sectarian dynamics reveals another insight. In Bahrain, the sectarian stake worked in keeping the military loyal precisely because the Khalifa regime filled both officer *and* rank-and-file positions with members of the privileged Sunni sect. In Syria, officers were from the privileged group (Alawites) while recruits were largely from the marginalized sectarian group (Sunnis). The Alawite officers had a strong incentive to remain loyal while the Sunni recruits had a strong incentive for defection. This leads to additional hypotheses:

> *Hypothesis 2a:* When a military is structured so that officers are largely from a privileged ethnic/sectarian group but the rank-and-file are from a disadvantaged group, there is a higher likelihood that the military will divide, with officers remaining loyal and recruits defecting.
>
> *Hypothesis 2b:* When the military is structured so that officers *and* recruits come from the same privileged ethnic/sectarian group, the military institution as a whole is likely to remain loyal.

Yet in conditions of political unrest, the ethnic/sectarian factor does not operate in isolation from other factors. Take the case of Sunni conscripts in the Syrian military. As members of a disadvantaged sectarian group, these conscripts were less likely to be loyal to the regime than their Alawite officers. However, the push toward defection came when the Syrian regime ordered these Sunni recruits to repress their own people, exacting a high moral cost. Yet the decision to defect was not an easy one, considering that the Syrian state imprisoned and executed early defectors. Those defectors who managed to escape often had to flee to Lebanon or Turkey, abandoning their families and homes. In other words, while many recruits were undoubtedly leaning toward defection, they also had to weigh the high personal cost of defecting. Should they remain loyal out of fear? Or should they risk their lives to avoid the moral costs of repressing their fellow Sunnis? Roughly 60,000 recruits have chosen to take the risk. This leads to the following hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 3:* When troops from a disadvantaged ethnic or sectarian group are ordered to repress their own people, they face high moral costs for loyalty. These moral costs may override fears of punishment for defecting.

We should also note that troops' assessment of moral costs is shaped by social and historical conditions. All security force members can potentially experience moral qualms about repressing unarmed resisters. However, longstanding ethnic or sectarian conflicts can complicate this. For instance, in a nation that has suffered from historical tensions of this nature, troops are less likely to be empathetic if civil resisters are largely from opposing ethnic and sectarian groups, as in Bahrain's case. Thus:

> *Hypothesis 4:* When troops share a common ethnic or sectarian identity with civil resisters, the perceived moral costs of repressing demonstrators and remaining loyal to the regime are greater.
>
> *Hypothesis 5:* When ethnically/religiously homogenous troops face civil resisters from an opposing ethnic/religious group, the perceived moral costs of repressing demonstrators may be lower.

The international response to these conflicts also influenced whether troops defected. For example, soldiers' willingness to remain loyal and carry out repressive orders was partially shaped by the potential political costs imposed by the global community. As the Obama administration shifted its position, calling upon Mubarak to resign, the Egyptian military feared that it might lose billions of dollars in aid and weaponry if it backed the regime. Thus staying loyal to Mubarak would exact a high political cost. In contrast, the Bahraini regime's crackdown on civil resisters has evoked few political costs, largely because the USA has a strategically important naval base there that it does not want to jeopardize. In Syria, some sanctions have been imposed. Yet, overall, Assad has been treated with kid gloves because of concerns about how his downfall might destabilize the region (Gelvin, 2012). In other words, global and structural factors, linked to international political interests, largely affect the degree of sanctions or political costs that will be imposed. This leads to the following hypotheses:

> *Hypothesis 6:* Political costs for regime loyalty will be greater if the regime has little strategic, military, economic, or political relevance to the international community.
>
> *Hypothesis 7:* Political costs for regime loyalty will be minimal if the regime holds great strategic, military, economic, or political relevance to the international community.

Finally, we can see that troops are unlikely to defect when they believe that the regime is stable. Yet what contributes to the perception of regime strength or fragility? In Bahrain's case, the presence of foreign troops reinforced the regime's security apparatus, thereby strengthening the

Khalifa monarchy. In addition, the lack of international sanctions against Bahrain meant that there were no outside forces weakening the regime. This leads to my final hypotheses:

> *Hypothesis 8:* The intervention of foreign troops increases the perception of regime stability, thereby deterring defections.
>
> *Hypothesis 9:* When the international community does not impose sanctions or withhold support, the regime's strength appears intact, thereby deterring defections.

## Conclusion

The civil resistance literature indicates that security force defections can strongly influence the outcome of nonviolent conflicts. Yet, up until now, we have known little about the conditions or factors that encourage troops to defect. In this article, I have sought to advance our knowledge about mutiny and civil resistance in three ways. First, I have synthesized diverse literatures to delineate the key factors that can facilitate or obstruct defections. Second, I put forward one argument about why defections did (or did not) occur in some of the Arab Spring uprisings. Consistent with a rational choice approach, I maintain that militaries will choose to side with civil resisters if that enables them to protect their financial and political perquisites. I also argue that macro-level factors matter because the nature of international ties and alliances can shape whether sanctions are imposed or foreign troops are sent to intervene, which shapes perceptions of regime durability and strength. Finally, I used the insights generated from these three Arab Spring cases to propose new hypotheses about defections.

Given the limited scope of this study, both in terms of its sample size and methodological approach, it is imperative that more research is devoted to this topic. Specifically, we need large-N statistical studies that test my hypotheses against a broad array of cases. Also, since it is difficult to know which of these factors truly had the greatest weight in troops' decisions, future researchers ought to conduct surveys and qualitative interviews with soldiers, asking them to identify the factors that matter most.

There are also many other questions about defections that should be explored. Researchers should examine the conditions that cause ethnic or sectarian factors to play a dominant role, since one might ask why sectarian factors were largely irrelevant in Egypt's struggle. While there is a high degree of religious homogeneity – roughly 80–90% of Egyptians are Sunni Muslims – there are important religious minorities, such as the Coptic Christians who comprise approximately 10–15% of the population. Additionally, I only examined defections within the military, not the police forces or paramilitary security groups. In Egypt, the military sided with civil resisters but the police largely remained loyal to Mubarak. Thus additional work is needed to examine the factors that lead other types of security forces to defect or remain loyal and how this interacts with or complicates the impact of military defections. Finally, researchers must also explore the potential problems that can result from military defections. The nonviolent civil resistance research has portrayed defections as unequivocally positive; however, as both the Syrian and Egyptian cases indicate, it can sometime generate new challenges. In Syria, military defectors began an armed struggle against the state, moving the country to civil war. In Egypt, civil resisters struggled to keep the military from usurping the movement. Additional research can identify the conditions that contribute to these post-defection problems. Overall, the more we know about when, why, and how defections occur, the more insight we gain into the dynamics of nonviolent regime change.

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