

# Authoritarianism and Democracy in Muslim Countries: Rentier States and Regional Diffusion

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ACCORDING TO FREEDOM HOUSE (2013),<sup>1</sup> among countries with populations higher than 200,000, the proportion of electoral democracies is 56 percent (98/174) worldwide, whereas it is only 20 percent (10/49) in Muslim-majority countries. The average Freedom House score (1 for most and 7 for least democratic) for all countries (3.5) is also better than the average score for Muslim-majority countries (5.1). Analyzing countries with populations over 500,000, Polity (2010) reaches a similar result: 57 percent (93/164) of all countries and 28 percent (13/47) of Muslim-majority countries are democracies.<sup>2</sup> Why is the rate (and score) of democracy disproportionately low among Muslim-majority countries? This article argues that the combined effects of rentier states and regional diffusion provide the best explanation.

The rentier state model explains the links between the rent revenue, limited taxation, and authoritarianism. A state becomes “rentier” if oil, gas, and mineral rents constitute over 40 percent of its revenues. The state

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<sup>1</sup>Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2013,” accessed at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FIW%202013%20Booklet.pdf>, 1 October 2013.

<sup>2</sup>Polity IV, “Country Reports 2010,” accessed at <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity06.htm>, 1 January 2012.

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control over extensive resource rents maintains the rulers with both incentive and power to reject people's participation in governance. Rulers of rentier states do not financially depend on taxation; therefore, the people cannot use taxation as leverage to make rulers accountable. In contrast, people in rentier states are dependent on governmental allocation of rent revenue, which creates a patron–client relationship as well as a lack of independent political, economic, and civil society.

Scholars have already elaborated the impact of hydrocarbon rents on authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)<sup>3</sup> and worldwide.<sup>4</sup> Some recent publications, however, have provided three major criticisms to the rentier state model.<sup>5</sup> First, they argue that hydrocarbon revenues cannot explain authoritarianism in MENA and Central Asia, because oil-poor countries in these regions are also authoritarian. Second, giving examples mostly from Latin America, they show the co-existence of democratization and oil wealth. Finally, they claim that the real reasons for authoritarianism in Muslim-majority countries would be other factors, such as culture and institutions. Besides these general critiques, another group of scholars also undermines the causal links between hydrocarbons and authoritarianism in the particular case of Muslim-majority countries. They point to Islam, the absence of secularism, patriarchy, or Arab exceptionalism as the real causes.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Hossein Mahdavy, "Patterns and Problems of Economic Development in Rentier States: The Case of Iran," in M.A. Cook, ed., *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East: From the Rise of Islam to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970); Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani, eds., *The Rentier State* (London: Croom Helm, 1987); Lisa Anderson, "The State in the Middle East and North Africa," *Comparative Politics* 20 (October 1987): 1–18; F. Gregory Gause III, *Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1994), 42–84.

<sup>4</sup>Michael L. Ross, "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?" *World Politics* 53 (April 2001): 325–361; Michael L. Ross, *The Oil Curse: How Petroleum Wealth Shapes the Development of Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012). See also Jay Ulfelder, "Natural-Resource Wealth and the Survival of Autocracy," *Comparative Political Studies* 40 (August 2007): 995–1018; Silje Aslaksen, "Oil and Democracy: More Than a Cross-country Correlation?" *Journal of Peace Research* 47 (July 2010): 421–431; Kevin Tsui, "More Oil, Less Democracy: Evidence from Worldwide Crude Oil Discoveries," *The Economic Journal* 121 (March 2011): 89–115.

<sup>5</sup>Michael Herb, "No Representation without Taxation? Rents, Development, and Democracy," *Comparative Politics* 37 (April 2005): 297–317; Stephen Haber and Victor Menaldo, "Do Natural Resources Fuel Authoritarianism? A Reappraisal of the Resource Curse," *American Political Science Review* 105 (February 2011): 1–26; Pauline Jones Luong and Erika Weinthal, *Oil Is Not a Curse: Ownership Structure and Institutions in Soviet Successor States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Mehmet Gürses, "Elites, Oil, and Democratization: A Survival Analysis," *Social Science Quarterly* 92 (March 2011): 164–184.

<sup>6</sup>Charles Rowley and Nathanael Smith, "Islam's Democracy Paradox: Muslims Claim to Like Democracy, So Why Do They Have So Little?" *Public Choice* 139 (June 2009): 273–299; Bernard Lewis, *Faith and Power: Religion and Politics in the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); M. Steven Fish, "Islam and Authoritarianism," *World Politics* 55 (October 2002): 4–37; Alfred Stepan with Graeme B. Robertson, "An 'Arab' More than 'Muslim' Electoral Gap," *Journal of Democracy* 14 (July 2003): 30–44.

This article first explores these four alternative explanations for disproportionate authoritarianism in Muslim-majority countries. It then addresses the critiques of the rentier state model. It stresses that a regional perspective is needed to fix the shortcomings of this model. The regional diffusion approach takes rentierism as a region-wide phenomenon and thus helps us understand why even oil-poor countries in MENA and Central Asia are authoritarian, and how some oil-rich countries in Latin America could become democracies. This approach emphasizes that rentier states promote authoritarianism in their non-rentier neighbors, especially if the former are numerically, economically, and politically dominant over the latter.

In other regions of the world, authoritarianism and democracy are also region-wide phenomena rather than isolated events in separate countries. Political regimes in a region affect each other through military and diplomatic relations, regional organizations, and sociocultural exchanges.<sup>7</sup> Given these effects, the transition to and consolidation of authoritarianism or democracy are largely regional processes, as seen in the rise of fascism before World War II and democratization in its aftermath in Western Europe; the rise (1970s) and fall (1980s–1990s) of the military regimes in Latin America; and the dominance of communism following World War II and its collapse in 1989–1991 in Eastern Europe.

Although geographical proximity and borders are crucial in determining a “region,” non-geographical factors such as military and political alliances, regional economic and sports organizations, and shared languages and religions also play significant roles. In the words of Eva Bellin, “It is a sense of commonality that fosters analogic thinking; it is cultural and historical proximity ... which is key to emulation.”<sup>8</sup> This is why this article makes two exceptions in its mostly geographical categorization by classifying Israel in Europe<sup>9</sup> and Azerbaijan in Central Asia. Additionally, it classifies Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in Europe, instead of the former Soviet Republics, because they are all members of the European Union.

While explaining disproportionate authoritarianism in Muslim-majority countries, my argument is based on the combined effects of rentier states

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<sup>7</sup>Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 72–76.

<sup>8</sup>Eva Bellin, “Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring,” *Comparative Politics* 44 (January 2012): 127–149, at 141.

<sup>9</sup>For some other studies which also categorize Israel in Europe, see Herb, “No Representation,” 315; Michael L. Ross, “Oil and Democracy Revisited,” unpublished manuscript (2009), 8, accessed at <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/ross/workingpapers.html>, 1 March 2012.

TABLE 1  
*Muslim-majority Countries in Comparison to their Regions*

<i>Europe</i>	<i>Americas</i>	<i>Asia-Pacific</i>	<i>Sub-Saharan Africa</i>	<i>Former Soviet Republics</i>	<i>MENA</i>
<i>Regional Democracy Rate and Average FH Score</i>					
97% (38/39) 1.5	86% (25/29) 2.5	45% (14/31) 3.9	35% (16/46) 4.5	25% (3/12) 5.2	12% (2/17) 5.5
<i>Muslim-majority Democracy Rate and Average FH Score</i>					
67% (2/3) 3.7	None	29% (2/7) 4.4	25% (4/16) 5.1	0% (0/6) 6.0	12% (2/17) 5.5

Source: Freedom House (FH), "Freedom in the World 2013."

and regional diffusion. Some scholars attach importance to rents but also highlight complementary factors such as the roles of weak civil society, repressive security apparatuses, military conflicts, and Western policies, when analyzing authoritarianism in the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> My argument does not contradict these wide-ranging explanations; instead, it tries to systematize them. The following sections elaborate how several related factors could be explained as parts of rentier and/or regional dynamics.

Table 1 surveys regimes in Muslim-majority countries, locating them in the six regions of the world. It uses both the Freedom House's dichotomist categorization (democratic versus authoritarian) and continuous scores (1 to 7). Muslim-majority countries in two regions appear to be almost exclusively authoritarian and to have the worst average Freedom House scores—MENA and Central Asia (as a sub-region of the former Soviet Republics). Until recent Arab uprisings, there was not a single Muslim-majority democracy in MENA and Central Asia, though currently Tunisia and Libya are categorized as democracies. Muslim-majority countries' rates of democracies and Freedom House scores in the other three regions mostly follow their regional trends. Thus, the gap between the rate of democracies (and average Freedom House scores) worldwide and those among Muslim-majority countries is mainly a result of authoritarianism in MENA and Central Asia.

<sup>10</sup>Eva Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics* 36 (January 2004): 139–157; Bellin, "Reconsidering the Robustness"; Tamara Cofman Wittes, *Freedom's Unsteady March: America's Role in Building Arab Democracy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), chap. 3; F. Gregory Gause, III, "Kings for All Seasons: How the Middle East's Monarchies Survived the Arab Spring," Analysis Paper, Brookings Doha Center, No. 8, September 2013.

The rentier state model helps us understand the strength of authoritarianism in MENA and Central Asia. About two thirds of the states in MENA and half of them in Central Asia are rentier states, and non-rentier states in these two regions have been under the influence of their rentier and authoritarian neighbors. For Central Asian republics, rentierism and the Soviet legacy are complementary factors. Currently, Russia, as a semi-rentier regional power, also has a pro-authoritarian impact over these republics as explained later.

Muslim-majority countries have higher percentages of rentier states in the former Soviet Republics (50 percent), the Asia-Pacific (29 percent), and Sub-Saharan Africa (25 percent), in comparison to the regional percentages of rentier states in these regions (25 percent, 10 percent, and 18 percent, respectively). This helps explain why rates and scores of Muslim-majority democracies are relatively inferior to the regional averages. Regarding the Freedom House scores in Europe, there is a gap between the regional average (1.5) and that of Muslim-majority countries (3.7). If we consider Muslim-majority countries as part of the Balkans sub-region, however, the gap shrinks. The average Freedom House score of 10 Balkan countries is 2.8.

Table 2 categorizes Muslim-majority states regarding regions, rentier states, electoral democracies, and Freedom House scores. It particularly shows that MENA and Central Asia disproportionately include rentier and authoritarian states. Muslim-majority countries in other parts of the world have lower percentages of rentier states and better democracy rates and scores. None of the nine Muslim-majority democracies with relatively good Freedom House scores (between 2.5 and 3.5) is a rentier state. Libya is an exception as a rentier state and electoral democracy. Its dictatorship was destroyed by foreign intervention and its current democracy score is very poor (4.5). In fact, Freedom House may soon drop it from the list of electoral democracies if the ongoing political chaos continues in Libya.

The next sections critically examine alternative explanations for authoritarianism and democracy that look at Islam and its history, Islam and secularism, Islam and patriarchy, and Arab versus non-Arab difference.

## ISLAM AND AUTHORITARIANISM

Some scholars point to Islam, as a religion or a culture, as the main factor that leads to the exceptionally high rate of authoritarianism in Muslim-majority countries.<sup>11</sup> One caveat for this explanation is the survey data, such

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<sup>11</sup>Rowley and Smith, "Islam's Democracy Paradox"; Brigitte Weiffen, "The Cultural-Economic Syndrome: Impediments to Democracy in the Middle East," *Comparative Sociology* 3 (January 2004): 353–375, esp. 358–359, 362.

TABLE 2  
*Muslim-majority Countries: Regions, Rentier States, and Democracy*

<i>FH</i>	<i>Europe</i>	<i>Asia-Pacific</i>	<i>Sub-Saharan Africa</i>	<i>Former Soviet Republics</i>	<i>MENA</i>
2.5		Indonesia*	Senegal* Sierra Leone*		
3	Albania*				
3.5	Turkey*	Bangladesh*	Comoros* Niger*		Tunisia*
4		<b>Malaysia</b>	Burkina Faso <b>Nigeria</b>		
4.5	Kosovo	Maldives Pakistan			Lebanon <b>Libya*</b> Morocco Egypt <b>Kuwait</b>
5			Guinea	Kyrgyzstan	<b>Algeria</b> Jordan <b>Oman</b> <b>Qatar</b>
5.5		<b>Brunei</b>	Djibouti Guinea-Bissau <b>Mauritania</b>	<b>Azerbaijan</b> <b>Kazakhstan</b>	<b>Bahrain</b> <b>Iran</b> <b>Iraq</b> <b>UAE</b> <b>Yemen</b>
6		Afghanistan	Gambia Mali	Tajikistan	
6.5			<b>Chad</b>		
7			Eritrea Somalia <b>Sudan</b>	<b>Turkmenistan</b> Uzbekistan	<b>Saudi Arabia</b> Syria

Sources: Author's index explained in Table 6; "Freedom in the World 2013."

Note: Bold indicates rentier states. Asterisks indicate electoral democracies.

as World Values Surveys, which indicate that about 85 percent of respondents in Muslim-majority societies regard democracy as the best form of government, and this level of support is as high as other societies in the world.<sup>12</sup> Thus being Muslim and favoring democracy are compatible.

Moreover, the variation between Muslim-majority democracies and autocracies needs to be addressed, because Islam is their shared characteristic. Charles Rowley and Nathanael Smith attempt to explain this variation. They argue that democracy and freedom deficits in Muslim-majority countries "appear to have something to do with the nature of Islam itself."<sup>13</sup> According to the authors, these deficits "are larger in the Islamic heartland than elsewhere." The "heartland" is defined as "the countries whose

<sup>12</sup>Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "The True Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Policy* 135 (March/April 2003): 62–70, at 64; M. Steven Fish, *Are Muslims Distinctive? A Look at the Evidence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 245.

<sup>13</sup>Rowley and Smith, "Islam's Democracy Paradox," 298.

territory ... was part of the Islamic empire by 750 A.D.,” including “the entirety of the ‘Arab core’ ... as well as ... Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, they assert, “Islam, somehow, is the cause of that deficit, for it is there that Islam has the deepest historical roots, has had the most time to shape and to transform culture.”<sup>15</sup>

It is unconvincing to say that Islam shaped contemporary authoritarianism in the territories where it was extant between 630 CE and 750 CE, but not in those it dominated in the interval of the last 1,264 years. Rowley and Smith also neglect various historical experiences in the so-called “heartland,” such as the Tsarist Russian invasion followed by 70-year atheistic Soviet rule in Central Asia.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the “early-versus-late converts” dichotomy, Rowley and Smith use two more criteria to explain how some Muslim-majorities could become democracies: either Islam in these countries “is unusually moderate and syncretic,” or their populations are only 60 percent to 70 percent Muslim.<sup>17</sup> The first claim—that Islam is extremist and orthodox in authoritarian countries, but is moderate and syncretic in the democratic cases—seems speculative and tautological. The second claim—that countries where the rate of Muslim population is low are likely to be more democratic—is clearer and falsifiable. Muslim-majority democracies have the following Muslim population rates: Albania (70 percent), Sierra Leone (77 percent), Indonesia (86 percent), Bangladesh (90 percent), Senegal (94 percent), Libya (97 percent), Comoros (98 percent), Niger (98 percent), Tunisia (98 percent), and Turkey (99 percent). The average Muslim population rate in these democracies (91 percent) is even higher than that of Muslim-majority autocracies (84 percent).<sup>18</sup>

Eric Chaney develops a similarly historical argument in a paper covered by *The Economist* and CNN. He argues that being conquered by Muslim Arabs’ (slave) armies until 1100 CE explains authoritarianism in several Muslim-majority countries. Unlike Rowley and Smith, he points to historical institutions, rather than Islam, as the source of authoritarianism.

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 273, 284.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 287.

<sup>16</sup>*Public Choice* published Rowley and Smith’s article as well as three endorsing articles. For a statistical critique of these analyses, see Marek Hanusch, “Islam and Democracy: A Response,” *Public Choice* (March 2013): 315–321.

<sup>17</sup>Rowley and Smith, “Islam’s Democracy Paradox,” 287.

<sup>18</sup>My sources for Muslim population rates and other demographic data throughout the article are the U.S. Department of State, “International Religious Freedom Reports 2010,” accessed at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/index.htm>, 1 December 2011; and CIA, “The World Factbook,” accessed at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2122.html#tu>, 1 December 2011.

Chaney, however, shares several problems with Rowley and Smith, such as historical determinism and ignoring the Russian/Soviet legacy in Central Asia.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, his map of the Islamic world in 1100 CE includes some current democracies, such as Turkey and Niger.

Actually, what Rowley and Smith imply by the “Islamic heartland,” and what Chaney defines as “territories conquered by 1100 CE” have similarities with what I delineate as MENA and Central Asia. Unlike their religious and historical explanations, this article explains persistent authoritarianism in these two regions by rentier states and regional diffusion.

### SECULARISM AND DEMOCRACY

Bernard Lewis has argued that Islam, unlike Christianity, rejects secularism, in terms of state–religion separation, and that this rejection is a major source of authoritarianism. In a recent publication, he asserts: “For believing Muslims, legitimate authority comes from God alone, and the ruler derives his power not from the people, nor yet from his ancestors, but from God and the holy law.”<sup>20</sup> Lewis notes that the absence of secularism is associated with the deficit of democracy in Muslim-majority countries, with Turkey being the exception that proves the rule: “Some observers, especially among those who see in Islam an obstacle to democratic development, point to secularism as the crucial difference between Turkey and the rest of the Muslim world.”<sup>21</sup> Samuel Huntington’s views are remarkably similar: “In Islam ... no distinction exists between religion and politics or between the spiritual and the secular, and political participation was historically an alien concept.”<sup>22</sup>

In fact, among Muslim-majority countries, Iran is an exception, with a semi-theocratic regime in which the clergy has executive authority. In other Muslim-majority autocracies, top executives have been lay party leaders, monarchs (in Bahrain, Brunei, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates [UAE]), or military officers (in Algeria, Chad, Egypt, Eritrea, Gambia, Guinea, Libya, Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen). Some survey data also problematize the argument of Lewis and Huntington. Using World Value Surveys, Steven

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<sup>19</sup>Eric Chaney, “Democratic Change in the Arab World, Past and Present,” Brookings Papers on Economic Activity, Spring 2012, 363–400.

<sup>20</sup>Lewis, *Faith and Power*, 66.

<sup>21</sup>Bernard Lewis, “Why Turkey is the only Muslim Democracy,” *Middle East Quarterly* 1 (March 1994): 41–49, at 45. For a critique, see Ahmet T. Kuru, “Assertive Secularism, Islam, and Democracy in Turkey,” in Jeffrey T. Kenny and Ebrahim Moosa, eds., *Islam in the Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>22</sup>Samuel P. Huntington, “Will More Countries Become Democratic?” *Political Science Quarterly* 99 (Summer 1984): 193–218, at 208.



Fish reveals that 66 percent of Muslims, in comparison to 71 percent of Christians, agree that “religious leaders should not influence how people vote.” He adds, “When we analyze this question in a multiple regression context, however, we see that the differences between Muslims and Christians are not actually substantial.”<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, constitutional regimes about state–Islam relations in 49 Muslim-majority countries show a broad variation. Seventeen have constitutions referring to sharia as a source of legislation; 9 refer to Islam with some official status, without mentioning sharia; and 23 have secular constitutions.<sup>24</sup> All cases in the first category are autocracies. A detailed analysis is needed to explore whether constitutional reference to sharia causes authoritarianism, or it is used by autocrats to legitimize their already-despotic rules. Four countries in the second category, which are neither Islamic nor secular, are democracies (44 percent). In the third and final category, out of 23 Muslim-majority secular states, only 6 are democracies (26 percent), which indicates that secularism is not a sufficient condition for democratization. In other words, the rate of democracy among Muslim-majority secular states (26 percent) is much lower than the rate of democracy in the world (56 percent). Thus, authoritarianism in Muslim-majority countries needs an explanation other than the lack of secularism.

### PATRIARCHY AND AUTHORITARIANISM

In a widely cited article, Fish points to the subordination of women as the cause of authoritarianism in Muslim-majority countries.<sup>25</sup> Although Fish mentions possible links between patriarchy and authoritarianism, the causal mechanism remains unexplained. In the history of Western countries, democratization began despite the existing patriarchy. Gender equality can be seen as an effect, rather than a cause or necessary condition, of democratization. For example, women have become chief executives in four Muslim-majority countries (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Turkey, and Indonesia) as a result of competitive elections.

A key data source in Fish’s article is the sex ratio (the ratio of male population to that of females). Fish claims that the sex ratio of Muslim-majority countries is much higher than of the non-Muslim-majority countries. For him, “A higher sex ratio often reflects lower status for and poorer

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<sup>23</sup>Fish, *Are Muslims Distinctive*, 47.

<sup>24</sup>Ahmet T. Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 259.

<sup>25</sup>Fish, “Islam and Authoritarianism.”

TABLE 3  
*Sex Ratio in Muslim-majority and Other Countries*

	<i>Aggregated Male Population</i>	<i>Aggregated Female Population</i>	<i>Sex Ratio</i>
Non-Muslim-majority countries	2,712,559,344	2,677,409,401	101.3
Muslim-majority countries	744,769,758	733,789,703	101.5

*Source:* The U.S. Census Bureau, "International Data Base (2010)," accessed at <http://www.census.gov/population/international/data/idb/informationGateway.php>, 1 July 2011.

treatment of women and girls," because "the imbalance cannot be explained without reference to neglect of girls' health care and nutrition and sex-selective abortion."<sup>26</sup> I tested this argument using the same source, the U.S. Census Bureau. In 2010, the sex ratio of aggregated populations of non-Muslim-majority countries is in fact almost the same as the sex ratio of the aggregated populations of 49 Muslim-majority countries, as shown in Table 3. There is no Muslim exceptionalism regarding the sex ratio.

The tiny difference between the ratios of Muslim-majority and other countries is due to a relationship between age and sex ratios. In the average world population, there are more males than females in age groups younger than 45–49, they are almost equal in the group of 45–49, and there are more females than males in age groups older than 45–49. Thus, younger societies have higher sex ratios than older ones. In Muslim-majority countries, the average median age is 23 for both sexes, while in the rest of the world it is 29 for males and 31 for females. This explains the slight difference.

Fish found a big gap between the sex ratios of Muslim-majority countries and others because he calculated them by taking the averages of country scores, instead of the aggregated populations. Six Muslim-majority countries have exceptionally high sex ratios, as summarized in Table 4. Fish only acknowledged the top two outliers and therefore was unable to see the remaining four cases' inflation of Muslim-majority countries' average sex ratio.

Table 4 reveals that the sex ratios of six outliers for ages between 0–14 are similar to those of the four most-populated "Western" countries. Yet after the ages of 15–19, the six countries' sex ratios greatly increase. The common feature of these five oil-rich countries and Maldives is extensively employing foreign male laborers. Although Maldives is oil-poor, it has "a population of 298,000 plus approximately 100,000 foreign workers."<sup>27</sup> Fish drops this

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 26, 31.

<sup>27</sup>U.S. Department of State, "International Religious Freedom Report 2009—Maldives," accessed at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148797.htm>, 1 December 2011.

TABLE 4  
Six Cases with Sex Ratios above 120/100 and Four “Western” Cases

Country	Sex Ratio (total)	Sex Ratio (age 0–14)	Population
Qatar	313.2	103.2	848,000
UAE	219.6	104.8	5,149,000
Bahrain	154.0	103.2	1,215,000
Kuwait	143.5	108.7	2,596,000
Maldives	140.4	104.0	395,000
Oman	122.9	105.3	3,023,000
U.S.	97.0	104.4	
Germany	96.4	105.4	
France	95.7	105.0	
U.K.	98.4	105.1	

Source: The U.S. Census Bureau, “International Data Base (2010)”;<sup>28</sup> CIA, “The World Factbook,” 2011.

factor too quickly, saying that most workers are from other Muslim countries, such as “Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran, and Pakistan,” and that “their absence from home lowers the sex ratio for their home countries.”<sup>28</sup> Yet migration does not affect the sex ratios in home countries with large populations, while seriously affecting the ratios in host countries with much smaller populations.

In addition to the sex ratio, Fish uses such criteria as the gap between male and female literacy rates and the degree of women’s representation in government. Regarding these criteria, however, several Muslim-majority autocracies (for example, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Malaysia) have much better scores than some Muslim-majority democracies (for example, Turkey and Tunisia). Subsequent studies also questioned the link between Islam, patriarchy, and authoritarianism. Michael Ross argues, “oil, not Islam, at fault ... Oil production reduces the number of women in the labor force, which in turn reduces their political influence.”<sup>29</sup> For him, oil hinders gender equality, as well as democracy, which will be elaborated later.

Unlike the three previous alternative explanations, that of Alfred Stepan and Graeme Robertson problematizes the very question about Muslim-majority countries. For them, there is an Arab, not Muslim, gap of democracy.

## ARAB EXCEPTIONALISM

Using the Polity scores (–10 to +10) for 2000, Stepan and Robertson note that among Muslim-majority countries with scores higher than zero, none

<sup>28</sup>Fish, “Islam and Authoritarianism,” 31.

<sup>29</sup>Michael L. Ross, “Oil, Islam, and Women,” *American Political Science Review* 102 (February 2008): 107–123, at 107.

is an Arab country and eleven are non-Arab countries.<sup>30</sup> Polity's more-recent (2010) data still confirms their perspective: only one Arab country (Lebanon) and twelve non-Arab Muslim-majority countries (Albania, Comoros, Indonesia, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Mali, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Turkey, Guinea-Bissau, Malaysia, and Pakistan; in the order of scores) have scores higher than zero. Freedom House's 2013 list of electoral democracies similarly includes only two Arab countries (Tunisia and Libya), in addition to eight non-Arab Muslim-majority cases.

Stepan and Robertson regard poverty as a major reason for authoritarianism and thus see countries whose gross national income (GNI) per capita are below the \$3,500 threshold as likely to be authoritarian. Indeed, my analysis based on Freedom House (2013) and World Bank's 2010 data on GNI per capita based on purchasing power parity (PPP) shows that 72 percent of all countries and 79 percent of Muslim-majority countries below this threshold are authoritarian.<sup>31</sup> For Stepan and Robertson, the fact that some non-Arab Muslim-majority countries are democratic despite being poor and many Arab countries are rich but authoritarian further shows the gap between non-Arab and Arab cases in the Muslim world. Using 2004 data, they categorize eight Arab countries as "underachievers": the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Libya. These cases were authoritarian despite having the GNI per capita (PPP) over \$5,500 that would lead to an expectation for them to be democratic. This category did not include any non-Arab Muslim cases. In contrast, five non-Arab Muslim countries were "overachievers": Indonesia, Bangladesh, Senegal, Mali, and Niger. They had electorally competitive regimes although their GNI per capita was lower than \$3,500. No Arab country existed in this category.<sup>32</sup>

When recent data are employed, however, Stepan and Robertson's argument appears to have problems explaining Muslim-majority autocracies. Table 5 explores their categories using Freedom House's 2013 list of electoral democracies and World Bank's 2010 data on GNI per capita (PPP). It employs Stepan and Robertson's list of 16 Arab countries, which excludes Sub-Saharan African members of the Arab League—Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, and Sudan. Their analysis includes a total of 45 Muslim-majority countries without providing data for Brunei, Comoros, Guinea-Bissau, and Kosovo. In the table, three results confirm Stepan and

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<sup>30</sup>Stepan with Robertson, "An 'Arab' More than 'Muslim'," 37.

<sup>31</sup>World Bank, "World Development Indicators: GNI per capita (PPP), 2010," accessed at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.PP.CD>, 1 January 2012.

<sup>32</sup>Alfred Stepan and Graeme B. Robertson, "Arab, Not Muslim, Exceptionalism," *Journal of Democracy* 15 (October 2004): 140–146, at 142.

TABLE 5  
*Muslim-majority Countries: Arab, Non-Arab; Underachiever, Overachiever*

<i>GNI Per Capita below \$ 3,500</i>		<i>GNI Per Capita between \$ 3,500–5,500</i>		<i>GNI Per Capita above \$ 5,500</i>	
<i>Overachievers</i>	<i>Autocracy</i>	<i>Theoretically Indeterminate</i>	<i>Theoretically Indeterminate</i>	<i>Democracy as Predicted</i>	<i>Underachievers</i>
	<i>as Predicted</i>	<i>(Democracy)</i>	<i>(Autocracy)</i>		
<i>Non-Arab Muslim Countries (33)</i>					
<b>5</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>8</b>
Senegal (\$1,910)	Uzbekistan (\$3,120)	Indonesia (\$4,200)	None	Turkey (\$15,170)	Brunei (\$50,180)
Bangladesh (\$1,810)	Pakistan (\$2,790)			Albania (\$8,740)	Malaysia (\$14,220)
Comoros (\$1,090)	Djibouti (\$2,460)				Iran (\$11,490)
Sierra Leone (\$830)	Nigeria (\$2,170)				Kazakhstan (\$10,770)
Niger (\$720)	Tajikistan (\$2,140)				Azerbaijan (\$9,280)
	Kyrgyzstan (\$2,100)				Maldives (\$8,110)
	Sudan (\$2,030)				Turkmenistan (\$7,490)
	Mauritania (\$1,960)				Kosovo (\$6,600)
	Gambia (\$1,300)				
	Burkina Faso (\$1,250)				
	Chad (\$1,220)				
	Guinea-Bissau (1,180)				
	Mali (\$1,030)				
	Guinea (\$1,020)				
	Afghanistan (\$1,060)				
	Somalia (\$600)				
	Eritrea (\$540)				
<i>Arab Countries (16)</i>					
<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>10</b>
None	Iraq (\$3,370)	None	Syria (\$5,120)	Libya (\$16,880)	Qatar (\$179,000)
	Yemen (\$2,370)		Morocco (\$4,600)	Tunisia (\$9,060)	Kuwait (\$58,350)
					UAE (\$50,580)
					Oman (\$25,190)
					Bahrain (\$24,710)
					S. Arabia (\$22,750)
					Lebanon (\$14,080)
					Algeria (\$8,180)
					Egypt (\$6,060)
					Jordan (\$5,800)

*Source:* Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2013”; World Bank, “World Development Indicators: GNI per capita (PPP), 2010.”

Robertson’s argument: there is still no Arab overachiever, the number of Arab underachievers has increased from eight to ten, and the number of non-Arab overachievers is still five. Yet the fourth result substantially weakens their argument: there are now eight, instead of zero, non-Arab underachievers. These countries have experienced a substantial increase of GNI per capita, but no democratization.

My argument, based on rentier states and regional effects, can help explain these eight non-Arab underachievers in two ways. First, Stepan and Robertson's perspective, which defines Arab countries as a cluster of authoritarianism, is correct but incomplete. To categorize persistent autocracies as two regions—MENA and Central Asia—would be a better explanation. Out of eight non-Arab underachievers, one (Iran) is in MENA and three (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan) are in Central Asia. Second, Stepan and Robertson do not explain the causal mechanism that links being an Arab country and an autocracy. My argument, in contrast, points to the rentier states as the main cause of authoritarianism in MENA and Central Asia. Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan are rentier states. Two underachievers in the Asia-Pacific—Brunei and Malaysia—are also rentier states. The remaining cases are Maldives, which was defined as a democracy in 2012 but not later because of a recent crisis, and Kosovo, which is still wrestling with the difficulties of the state-building process. My argument also explains 10 Arab underachievers. Seven of them are rentier states. The other three are not rentier states, but they are under the influence of rentier neighbors. Some country-specific explanations can also be mentioned. Egypt, which barely passes the \$5,500 GNI per capita threshold, is a semi-rentier state. Jordan is also barely an underachiever, and economically depends on rentier neighbors. Lebanon has the best Freedom House score (4.5) among “underachievers” together with Maldives and Kosovo, and only after Malaysia (4). The next sections elaborate my argument based on rentier states and regional diffusion.

## RENTIER STATES

A rent is a geological gift that does not need labor-intensive production. The revenues from oil, gas, and mineral rents can make the economy and the state “rentier.” The literature on rents focuses on their various negative impacts, including military conflicts, economic underdevelopment, and political instability. This article, instead, focuses on authoritarianism.

The rentier state depends on rents instead of non-rentier tax revenues. The rent revenue provides authoritarian rulers with both an *incentive* to preserve their regimes and the *means* to do so. According to Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi, the “struggle for dictatorship is more attractive in poorer countries,” because “the gain from getting all rather than a part of total income” is bigger.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the struggle for

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<sup>33</sup>Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi, “Modernization: Theories and Facts,” *World Politics* 49 (January 1997): 155–183, at 167.

dictatorship is very attractive in rentier states, because getting almost all of the rents is possible for an authoritarian leader and the gain is enormous. In rentier states, limited taxation minimizes the people's leverage to keep the rulers accountable. These rulers could implicitly assert, "no representation without taxation."<sup>34</sup>

In a non-rentier system of extraction, taxpayers constitute a very large number of citizens, who are relatively mobile in terms of their capital, and even production. If the government loses its legitimacy, it becomes very difficult to monitor and coerce all taxpayers. The taxpayers can move their money and business to other countries. Oil, gas, and mineral productions, in contrast, are geographically static and controlled by a small number of individuals. Therefore, their rents are much easier to monitor and extract, if not monopolize, by a central government, than other types of production. The United States is the only exception that "allows the widespread private ownership of oil reserves."<sup>35</sup> An oil-dependent economy, in short, is unlikely to have either an autonomous bourgeoisie, because of the government monopoly over oil, or an organized labor, due to the fact that oil is not labor-intensive.

A complementary causal mechanism between the rentier state and authoritarianism is the distribution of rents.<sup>36</sup> Instead of extracting from its citizens, the rentier state allocates money, jobs, and services to them. This way of buying political loyalty creates patron-client relations, rather than democratic exchanges, between the rulers and the people. The rentier state's welfare policies also lead to an enormous bureaucracy, which further prevents the emergence of independent civil society and economic society. The rent revenue can negatively influence individuals too, because it may become "a serious blow to the ethics of work. Income is no longer a reward of serious and hard work; it is very often related to special circumstances, chance, location, etc."<sup>37</sup> Moreover, rents provide authoritarian regimes with the financial capacity to expand their despotic security apparatuses and to use state-owned media and other propaganda mechanisms against the opposition.

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<sup>34</sup>Giacomo Luciani coined this reversed version of the slogan used by the American revolutionaries in his "Allocation vs. Production States: A Theoretical Framework," in Beblawi and Luciani, eds., *The Rentier State*, 75.

<sup>35</sup>Ross, *The Oil Curse*, 34.

<sup>36</sup>Ross, "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?" 333–334. For differences between Ross's arguments in "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?" and *The Oil Curse*, see Ahmet T. Kuru, "Review of *The Oil Curse*," *Insight Turkey* 14 (Fall 2012): 210–214.

<sup>37</sup>Hazem Beblawi, "The Rentier State in the Arab World," in Beblawi and Luciani, eds., *The Rentier State*, 62.

The rentier state model also explains why some countries with high levels of GNI per capita (the above-mentioned “underachievers”) may remain politically authoritarian.<sup>38</sup> In these countries, the flow of foreign capital by rentier export inflates the GNI before the country reaches a certain level of industrialization. This leads to a gap between the level of economic wealth and the level of “modernization,” which refers to high levels of schooling, professional division of labor, and socioeconomic complexity. To evaluate the gap between rentier wealth and “modernization,” I calculated the average GNI per capita of 27 rentier states (by eliminating the outlier Qatar [\\$173,000]). The result is \$15,302, which would have the worldwide rank of #52 in World Bank’s 2010 list. Yet in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)’s Non-income Human Development Index in 2011 (calculated with only education and health), these 27 states’ average score is 649, which would have the rank of #110 in the world.<sup>39</sup> In this regard, a high level of GNI per capita is not a predictor of democratization in rentier states, where rent revenue boosts the GNI without equally helping socioeconomic sophistication.

To explore the relationship between rentier states and authoritarianism, I calculated the percentages of oil, gas, and mineral rents; non-rentier taxes; and other revenues in the total revenues of 170 governments. For Egypt and Panama, I additionally counted Suez and Panama Canal fees as rents. I primarily used International Monetary Fund’s “Country Information: Article IV Staff Reports” for each country. I completed and crosschecked the data by using various other online sources, including country reports of the Economist Intelligence Unit and the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. Following Giacomo Luciani and Michael Herb, I defined a state as rentier if hydrocarbon and mineral rents constituted over 40 percent of its total revenue.<sup>40</sup> If the rents/government revenue rate was between 31 percent and 40 percent, I called it a semi-rentier state. The results are partially summarized in Tables 6 and 7.

I also examined rents percentage in gross domestic product (GDP) as secondary data to assess a rentier state’s ability to control the economy in general.<sup>41</sup> Twenty-eight countries with the highest rents/GDP rates overlap with my list of 28 rentier states, with only two exceptions. Uzbekistan and Papua New Guinea, instead of Sudan and Malaysia, are in the list of

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<sup>38</sup>Ross, *The Oil Curse*, 336–337.

<sup>39</sup>UNDP, “Human Development Index 2011,” accessed at [http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR\\_2011\\_EN\\_Table1.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2011_EN_Table1.pdf), 1 January 2012.

<sup>40</sup>Luciani, “Allocation vs. Production,” 70; Herb, “No Representation,” 299.

<sup>41</sup>My primary data source was World Bank, “World Development Indicators 2009,” accessed at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PETR.RT.ZS>, 1 May 2012.



TABLE 6  
*Rentier and Semi-Rentier States*

#	Country	Rent %	Tax (%)	Regime
<i>Rentier States</i>				
1	East Timor	0.93	0.05	D
2	<b>Brunei</b>	0.92	0.03	A
3	Equatorial Guinea	0.91	0.03	A
4	<b>Libya</b>	0.90	0.05	D
5	<b>Iraq</b>	0.88	0.05	A
6	<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	0.85	0.04	A
7	Congo (Republic)	0.85	0.14	A
8	<b>Kuwait</b>	0.82	0.02	A
9	<b>Bahrain</b>	0.80	0.15	A
10	Angola	0.80	0.13	A
11	<b>Chad</b>	0.79	0.20	A
12	<b>Oman</b>	0.77	0.11	A
13	<b>Nigeria</b>	0.75	0.23	A
14	<b>Turkmenistan</b>	0.75	0.20	A
15	<b>Yemen</b>	0.75	0.18	A
16	<b>United Arab Emirates</b>	0.74	0.18	A
17	<b>Qatar</b>	0.66	0.13	A
18	<b>Algeria</b>	0.66	0.31	A
19	<b>Sudan</b>	0.61	0.34	A
20	<b>Azerbaijan</b>	0.61	0.35	A
21	Gabon	0.59	0.40	A
22	<b>Iran</b>	0.55	0.28	A
23	Trinidad and Tobago	0.52	0.31	D
24	Venezuela	0.51	0.42	A
25	<b>Kazakhstan</b>	0.50	0.50	A
26	<b>Mauritania</b>	0.42	0.30	A
27	Bolivia	0.41	0.52	D
28	<b>Malaysia</b>	0.41	0.53	A
<i>Semi-Rentier States</i>				
29	Ecuador	0.37	0.56	D
30	Norway	0.36	0.57	D
31	<b>Egypt</b>	0.36	0.49	A
32	Russia	0.35	0.61	A
33	Mexico	0.33	0.40	D

Source: Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2013"; Author's index on rent and tax rates in government revenues of 170 countries, which is primarily based on International Monetary Fund, "Country Information: Article IV Staff Reports," accessed at <http://www.imf.org/external/country/index.htm>. The data refers to the most recent year, which is 2008, 2009, or 2010 in almost all cases. It was completed and cross-checked with the Economist Intelligence Unit reports, <http://country.eiu.com/AllCountries.aspx>, and the Revenue Watch's summaries of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative reports, <http://data.revenuewatch.org/eiti/all.php?i%5B%5D=0&i%5B%5D=11&Submit+=Submit>. Some additional online sources included the U.S. Geological Survey reports, <http://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/country/europe.html>, and OECD's "Revenue Statistics," <http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=REV>. All were accessed on 1 February 2012.

Note: Bold indicates Muslim-majority countries. A: Autocracy; D: Democracy.

TABLE 7  
*Rent and Tax Rates in Government Revenues: Regional Averages*

	Europe	Americas	Asia-Pacific	Sub-Saharan Africa	Former Soviet Republics	MENA
Rents %	1	12	13	18	21	55
Taxes %	85	73	68	62	66	32

Source: Author's index explained in Table 6.

countries with the highest rents/GDP rates. Rent per capita is another alternative measurement that has been widely used. I did not employ it since this measurement does not sufficiently reflect some relative values. For example, Norway has more hydrocarbon income per capita than does Brunei,<sup>42</sup> but this conceals the fact that hydrocarbon rents constitute only 36 percent of government revenues and 18 percent of the GDP in Norway, whereas they account for 92 percent of government revenues and 65 percent of GDP in Brunei. There is a categorical difference between the impacts of rents on the political regimes of these two countries, which is not seen in their amounts of oil/gas income per capita. Nevertheless, different measurements do not substantially change the country lists. In Ross's dataset, the top 27 countries with oil/gas income per capita over \$1,600 overlap my list of 28 rentier states with few differences. Ross's list includes Norway, Canada, and Russia, instead of Yemen, Sudan, Chad, and Malaysia in my list.<sup>43</sup>

Table 6 shows rentier and semi-rentier states. It reveals that 24 out of 28 rentier states are authoritarian. Muslim-majority countries constitute about three quarters (20/28) of all rentier states, although they are only over a quarter (49/174) of countries in this analysis. More specifically, 14 of 20 Muslim-majority rentier states are in MENA and Central Asia, which is crucial in assessing very high rates of autocracies in these regions.

Recently, some significant publications criticized the rentier state model. Certain scholars, for example, questioned the linkages between natural resources, taxation, and authoritarianism, particularly in MENA. For them, the levels of taxation in MENA and in other regions are not very different,<sup>44</sup> and there is "only a weak negative relationship between non-hydrocarbon sector taxation and hydrocarbon revenue."<sup>45</sup> In fact, my index,

<sup>42</sup>Ross, *The Oil Curse*, 21.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 20–22.

<sup>44</sup>John Waterbury, "From Social Contracts to Extraction Contracts: The Political Economy of Authoritarianism and Democracy," in J. Paul Entelis, ed., *Islam, Democracy, and the State in North Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 151–155.

<sup>45</sup>Luong and Weinthal, *Oil Is Not a Curse*, 332.

summarized in Table 7, shows an exceptionally low average percentage of tax revenue in MENA and a strong negative relationship between non-rentier taxation and rent revenues. The table does not show a third major source of government revenue, international aid, which is particularly important for some countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia-Pacific. The order of regions in Table 1 (from the most to the least democratic) and Table 7 (from the lowest to the highest percentage of rents in government revenue) is indeed the same.

Among 12 former Soviet Republics, six Central Asian cases have a higher average rate of rent revenues (35 percent) and lower average rate of tax revenues (53 percent). Similarly, in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia-Pacific, Muslim-majority countries' average rates of rent revenues (21 percent and 23 percent, respectively) are higher than the regional averages, and their average rates of tax revenues (53 percent and 55 percent) are lower than the regional averages. This is consistent with the fact that Muslim-majority countries have inferior rates of democracies (and democracy scores) than the regional averages in these three regions.

Another group of critics argue that the resource rents are not an exogenous factor, but an outcome of poverty or some rulers' deliberate rentierism. Herb points to the former: "poverty causes rentierism,"<sup>46</sup> while Stephen Haber and Victor Menaldo note the latter: "Rulers who have inherited inveterately weak states tend to have pressing fiscal needs and short time horizons; they may therefore *choose* to search for resources and/or extract them at high rates."<sup>47</sup>

In fact, the data on oil reserves reveal rents as a geologically determined exogenous factor. The 28 rentier states have 83 percent of the world's oil reserves, leaving only 17 percent to the other 146 countries. Muslim-majority countries have 67 percent of the world's oil reserves, which concentrate in MENA (59 percent of the world). Similarly, 28 rentier states (57 percent) plus semi-rentier Russia (24 percent) have 81 percent of the world's gas reserves. Muslim-majority countries have 58 percent of the world's gas reserves, which concentrate in MENA (48 percent of the world) and Central Asia (7 percent of the world).<sup>48</sup>

It is true that rents can constitute higher percentages of GDP and government revenue in poorer countries. Yet, GDP values of rentier states show a broad range, from \$560 billion (Saudi Arabia) to \$0.7 billion (East

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<sup>46</sup>Herb, "No Representation," 303.

<sup>47</sup>Haber and Menaldo, "Do Natural Resources Fuel Authoritarianism?" 2; emphasis original.

<sup>48</sup>BP, "Statistical Review of World Energy 2011," accessed at <http://www.bp.com/sectionbodycopy.do?categoryId=7500&contentId=7068481>, 1 January 2012.

Timor), as do GNI per capita values—\$179,000 (Qatar) to \$1,220 (Chad). Moreover, seeking resource rents is not an exclusive characteristic of poor or authoritarian countries. Ross notes the opposite: “Today the rich democracies of North America and Europe have attracted about 10 times more foreign direct investment in mining, per square kilometer, than the rest of the world.”<sup>49</sup> Scholars document the negative impacts of resource rents on democracy even in highly developed cases such as some U.S. states.<sup>50</sup> For decades, the “oil curse” literature has referred to the “Dutch disease,” not an Arab or African disease.<sup>51</sup>

Another argument, by Haber and Menaldo, is that “natural resources and authoritarianism are unrelated” because resource-reliant autocracies were authoritarian before the beginning of hydrocarbon production. MENA countries have “a long history of... foreign conquest (beginning with the Sassanid Empire, followed by the Ottomans, and ending with British protectorates) and authoritarian government.” Countries in MENA and Central Asia were authoritarian “for centuries before they found oil.”<sup>52</sup> This sounds like historical determinism, and similar assertions can be made for any region; no region was democratic “centuries” ago. The number of democracies has increased from about a dozen at the end of the World War II to around a hundred today. Many non-rentier states have succeeded in democratization in the last several decades, while rentier states have mostly been stuck in authoritarianism.

Nevertheless, the critics are also right on some issues. Three rentier states (East Timor, Trinidad and Tobago, and Bolivia) and three semi-rentier states (Norway, Ecuador, and Mexico) are democratic. Additionally, non-rentier countries in MENA and Central Asia are also authoritarian. These issues can be explained by taking the relationship between rentierism and authoritarianism as a region-wide phenomenon instead of one bound by state boundaries. For East Timor, neighborhood with Australia is crucial: the latter has had a direct impact on both oil production and democratization in the former. Two interrelated factors have been important for Norway. First, it is in democratic Europe. Second, before substantial oil production began in the 1970s, it already “had a well-established

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<sup>49</sup>Ross, *The Oil Curse*, 9.

<sup>50</sup>Ellis Goldberg, Erik Wibbels, and Eric Mvukiyehe, “Lessons from Strange Cases: Democracy, Development, and the Resource Curse in the U.S. States,” *Comparative Political Studies* 41 (April/May 2008): 477–514.

<sup>51</sup>“The Dutch Disease,” *The Economist*, 26 November 1977, 82–83.

<sup>52</sup>Haber and Menaldo, “Do Natural Resources Fuel Authoritarianism?” 10–11. For a critique, see Jørgen J. Andersen and Michael L. Ross, “The Big Oil Change: A Closer Look at the Haber–Menaldo Analysis,” *Comparative Political Studies* 47 (June 2014): 993–1021.

democratic system based on the country's 1814 constitution."<sup>53</sup> The remaining four rentier/semi-rentier democracies are all in Latin America. The significant difference between Latin America and MENA/former Soviet Republics necessitates a closer look at their diverse characteristics.

Out of 17 countries in MENA, 11 are rentier, including highly influential Iran and Saudi Arabia. Egypt, another regional power, is semi-rentier. So is the leading country among the former Soviet Republics—Russia. Moreover a quarter of states (3/12) in the former Soviet Republics are rentier. Among 27 countries in Latin America, however, there are only 3 rentier states and 2 semi-rentier states. None of them is a regional power. The only exception is Mexico, which is also a member of NAFTA. Moreover, the ratio of average rent percentage to average tax percentage in government revenue is lower in Latin America (13 percent: 72 percent), in comparison to the former Soviet Republics (21 percent: 66 percent) and especially MENA (55 percent: 32 percent).

An additional reason for the region-wide dominance of rentier states is that, except for hydrocarbons, there are limited economic opportunities in MENA and the former Soviet Republics. For example, the total percentage of arable lands, permanent crops, and forests is 13 percent in MENA and 38 percent in the former Soviet Republics (16 percent in Central Asia), while it is 55 percent in Latin America and 48 percent worldwide.<sup>54</sup> Since deserts occupy most territories in MENA and Central Asia, oil can dominate the economy of these regions in an easier way. Underdevelopment of many non-rentier states in MENA and Central Asia makes them economically dependent on regional and international partners. The combination of foreign aid and remittances constitutes substantial percentages of GDP in Jordan (21 percent), Lebanon (22 percent), Kyrgyzstan (20 percent), and Tajikistan (38 percent; the highest rate in the world). The only comparable cases in Latin America are Haiti (23 percent) and Honduras (20 percent), both of which are authoritarian.<sup>55</sup> For these reasons, oil and gas rents have had a much more dominant role in MENA and the former Soviet Republics in comparison to Latin America.

Thad Dunning argues that oil has had democratic effects in Latin America and autocratic effects in Arab Gulf countries. According to him,

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<sup>53</sup>Ole Andreas Engen, Oluf Langhelle, and Reidar Bratvold, "Is Norway Really Norway?" in Brenda Shaffer and Taleh Ziyadov, eds., *Beyond the Resource Curse* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 262.

<sup>54</sup>I calculated this data based on World Bank, "World Development Indicators 2010," accessed at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.LND.ARBL.ZS>, 1 January 2012.

<sup>55</sup>The data source for remittances is World Bank, "Migration and Remittances Factbook 2011," accessed at <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTLAC/Resources/Factbook2011-Ebook.pdf>, 1 February 2012.

in Latin America, where rents/GDP rate is lower and economic inequality is higher, hydrocarbon rents minimize the elite's concern about democracy's redistribution of wealth through taxation. Elected governments can allocate rents, rather than redistributing wealth. In Gulf countries, however, rents/GDP rates are much higher and economic inequality is lower. Thus the elite does not want to share rents and oppose democratization.<sup>56</sup>

The regional perspective also problematizes the counterfactuals that Herb, and Haber and Menaldo employ while evaluating how regimes in rentier states would have changed if they had not been oil exporters. These scholars take current authoritarianism in non-rentier neighbors as a basis in extrapolating counterfactual possibilities for rentier states in MENA and Central Asia. For them, if these states had had no hydrocarbon production, they would have been still authoritarian like their neighbors.<sup>57</sup> In fact, authoritarianism in non-rentier countries of MENA and Central Asia should not be examined independent of their rentier neighbors. If rentier states had not been oil producers, both they *and* their neighbors, in other words their region, could have been more democratic. The next section elaborates on the role of regional diffusion.

## REGIONAL DIFFUSION

In addition to geographical proximity, countries in a "region" are connected through shared military, political, economic, and sportive organizations, as well as common language, religion, and culture. In terms of political regime change or continuity, different means of regional diffusion can be categorized in four types. First, a powerful country can use military force to shape regimes in the region. That is what happened in Eastern Europe during the Cold War, particularly with the Soviet interventions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia to protect communism, which was later formulated as the "Brezhnev doctrine." Second, countries can mobilize regional organizations to affect the political regime of a member. An example is the European Union's (EU) 1999 sanctions against Austria when the far right Freedom Party became one of the two governing parties in a coalition government. Third, a country can support particular actors in a neighboring country regarding the possibility of regime change or at least power transition. Russia unsuccessfully resisted the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine in 2004–2005 by supporting incumbent President Viktor Yanukovich,

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<sup>56</sup>Thad Dunning, *Crude Democracy: Natural Resource Wealth and Political Regimes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 10–20.

<sup>57</sup>Herb, "No Representation," 301–302, 306; Haber and Menaldo, "Do Natural Resources Fuel Authoritarianism?" 11, 3.

who would come back in elections five years later. Finally, a country's regime transformation experience can inspire neighbors by different means (publications, the media, trade, and tourism) regardless of whether the country tries exporting its model. Examples are the Egyptian military coup d'état in 1952, which inspired military officers in the region, most notably the Iraqi officers staging a similar coup in 1958; and the Iranian Revolution of 1979 that emboldened several Islamist groups throughout MENA.

Scholars have documented the importance of regional diffusion for democratization with statistical analyses.<sup>58</sup> They show that "countries often democratize in clusters within regions of the world."<sup>59</sup> This is not a recent trend, but has been a consistent characteristic of democratization for a long time: "Since 1815, the probability that a randomly chosen country will be a democracy is about 0.75 if the majority of its neighbors are democracies, but only 0.14 if the majority of its neighbors are nondemocracies."<sup>60</sup> Regional diffusion is also a dynamic process: "Not only are regimes generally similar within regions, but there is also a strong tendency for transitions to impart a regional convergence."<sup>61</sup>

Regional diffusion can account for both democratization and authoritarianism; thus it does not explain why some regions converge toward democratization while others, such as MENA and Central Asia (as a sub-region of the former Soviet Republics), remain as authoritarian. As the previous section noted, the rentier state model fills this gap. Non-rentier states are politically and economically dependent on rentier neighbors through aid and remittances. Powerful rentier or semi-rentier states such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Russia, have promoted authoritarian allies in their regions, as elaborated below.

### *Former Soviet Republics*

In addition to rentierism, another major reason for authoritarianism in the former Soviet Republics is the Soviet legacy. Nonetheless, the Soviet legacy per se is not sufficient to explain authoritarianism, as seen in the cases of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, which have managed to become democracies. Unlike the republics in Central Asia, these three lack hydrocarbon

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<sup>58</sup>John, O'Loughlin, Michael D. Ward, Corey L. Lofdahl, Jordin S. Cohen, David S. Brown, David Reilly, Kristian S. Gleditsch, and Michael Shin, "The Diffusion of Democracy, 1946–1994," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 88 (December 1998): 545–574; Jon C. Pevehouse, *Democracy from Above: Regional Organizations and Democratization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>59</sup>Barbara Wejnert, "Diffusion, Development, and Democracy, 1800–1999," *American Sociological Review* 1 (February 2005): 53–81, at 54.

<sup>60</sup>Kristian Skrede Gleditsch and Michael D. Ward, "Diffusion and the International Context of Democratization," *International Organization* 60 (October 2006): 911–933, at 916.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 930.

rents, and two of them share borders with the EU. The Soviet legacy and rentierism are, in fact, overlapping factors. Oil and gas “accounted for 80 percent of Soviet hard currency earnings between 1973 and 1985.”<sup>62</sup> The sharp decline of oil prices in the 1980s caused an “economic and political crisis that ultimately led to the Soviet government’s collapse.”<sup>63</sup>

The former Soviet Republics, except Georgia, have been all members of the Commonwealth of Independent States, which has symbolized, if not institutionalized, Russia’s political and economic leadership. The Russian language has also remained the lingua franca even in Central Asian Turkic republics. Hydrocarbon production has been a crucial aspect of Russia’s dominance over its neighbors, as well as its domestic politics. Increasing oil and gas prices “coincided with the re-centralization of power under Putin, the reassertion of Kremlin control over national television, the spread of credible reports of electoral fraud, and the harassment of independent social and political organizations.”<sup>64</sup> Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the only two Central Asian Republics with no hydrocarbon exports, are particularly dependent on the Russian economy. As mentioned above, remittances are crucial for these two countries and 90 percent of their remittances come from Russia (followed by Kazakhstan).<sup>65</sup>

Besides the Russian influence, Central Asia has its own rentier and regional dynamics that have promoted authoritarianism. Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan are rentier states. Even non-rentier Uzbekistan has a high rate of rents/government revenue (22 percent) and worldwide ranking (#44). Kyrgyzstan, which has had higher democracy scores than its neighbors, is an important case in which to observe the authoritarian impacts of rentier neighbors. Following its independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan had a better democratization performance than Slovakia. Later on, however, Slovakia, given its close interaction with the EU, became a democracy, whereas Kyrgyzstan ended up with an authoritarian regime, due to its geography surrounded by autocracies. “Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, larger and more powerful than Kyrgyzstan, have let it be known that they prefer a noncompetitive political system in a country that has so much contact with their own.”<sup>66</sup> In 2005, however, Kyrgyzstan joined Ukraine

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<sup>62</sup>Ross, *The Oil Curse*, 83.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>64</sup>Daniel Treisman, “Is Russia Cursed by Oil?” *Journal of International Affairs* 63 (Spring/Summer 2010): 85–102, at 85.

<sup>65</sup>UNDP, “Remittances in Europe and Central Asia,” accessed at <http://europeandcis.undp.org/senioreconomist/show/9BC4249F-F203-1EE9-B78FC634499EC270>, 1 April 2012.

<sup>66</sup>Jeffrey S. Kopstein and David A. Reilly, “Geographic Diffusion and the Transformation of the Postcommunist World,” *World Politics* 53 (Fall 2000): 1–37, at 34.



and Georgia in terms of experiencing “Color Revolutions.” Although these “revolutions” did not produce stable democracies, they still showed the possibility of evading regional (former Soviet / Central Asian) effects by international (Western) influences. This issue will be briefly explored again in the conclusion.

### *MENA and Arab Uprisings*

Similar to the former Soviet Republics, MENA has also multiple and inter-related causes of authoritarianism, such as rentier revenues and military conflicts.<sup>67</sup> In the post-Cold War era, the region witnessed armed conflicts that polarized the entire region, such as the Gulf War (1990–1991), the invasion of Iraq (2003), and the Israel–Hezbollah War (2006), as well as civil wars in Algeria (1991–2002), Iraq (2006–2007, and 2014–present), and Syria (2011–present). This is also reflected in the arms race: MENA (4 percent) with the former Soviet Republics (3 percent) (including Central Asia [2.5 percent]) have the highest rates of military spending as percentage of GDP, in comparison with other regions (the Americas [1.3 percent], Europe [1.5 percent], Asia-Pacific [1.9 percent], and Sub-Saharan Africa [1.9 percent]).<sup>68</sup> Scholars have documented how hydrocarbon and mineral rents increase the likelihood of intra-state and inter-state conflicts.<sup>69</sup> This has further consolidated authoritarianism in MENA, because a “history of prior regional conflict decreases the likelihood that a country will be democratic.”<sup>70</sup> In other words, “states that became more democratic did so in part because their regions were not characterized by extensive inter-state conflict.”<sup>71</sup>

In short, oil and gas rents have led to a vicious circle of conflicts and authoritarianism in MENA. Etel Solingen effectively compares this to the virtuous circle in East Asia, where export-oriented economies have led to intra-regional trade, de-militarization, and regional peace. This did not necessarily cause a region-wide democratization; yet, at least, it lifted a barrier to democratization for several countries in East Asia. According to Solingen, in the Middle East, in contrast, inward-looking models of

<sup>67</sup>Ibrahim Elbadawi, Samir Makdisi, and Gary Milante, “Explaining the Arab Democracy Deficit: The Role of Oil and Conflicts,” in Ibrahim Elbadawi and Samir Makdisi, eds., *Democracy in the Arab World: Explaining the Deficit* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>68</sup>Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, “Background Paper on SIPRI Military Expenditure Data, 2010,” accessed at <http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/factsheet2010>, 1 December 2011.

<sup>69</sup>Ross, *The Oil Curse*, chap. 5; Macartan Humphreys, “Natural Resources, Conflict, and Conflict Resolution: Uncovering the Mechanisms,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49 (August 2005): 508–537.

<sup>70</sup>Gleditsch and Ward, “Diffusion and the International Context of Democratization,” 930.

<sup>71</sup>William R. Thompson, “Democracy and Peace: Putting the Cart before the Horse?” *International Organization* 50 (January 1996): 141–174, at 147.

political survival and economic self-sufficiency have prevented intra-regional economic interdependence while enhancing militarization and intra-regional conflicts. Hydrocarbon production has played a key role in the divergence of these two regions: “Abundant natural resources hindered the prospects for competitive manufacturing, enhanced patronage resources for beneficiaries of import-substitution, and eroded private sector where-withal in the Middle East.” In contrast, “Natural resource scarcity and effective land reform weakened opponents, and favored proponents, of labor-intensive manufacturing and private entrepreneurship in East Asia.”<sup>72</sup>

The vicious circle in MENA, however, can be broken, as the recent Arab uprisings have shown. The Tunisian revolution started in December 2010 and quickly inspired other Arab-speaking countries. Social media networks and Al Jazeera TV disseminated the revolutionary mood. The Egyptian revolution happened just two months later and brought substantial momentum to anti-regime groups in other countries. Qatar supported revolutionary forces in various Arab countries, especially Libya. The Arab League played an active role against the Libyan regime by suspending its membership and supporting the NATO-enforced no-fly zone. The Arab League also suspended Syria’s membership, criticizing the regime’s brutal crack-down. Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have provided various types of support to the civilian and armed opposition against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. As part of the region-wide transformations, the Yemeni president had to step down, an Islamist party constituted the government for the first time in Morocco, and in response to popular protests, monarchs changed prime ministers in Kuwait and Jordan (four times). In a nutshell, Arab uprisings have experienced several means of regional diffusion. As Bellin puts it, “If anything, the Arab Spring has demonstrated the importance of regional effects.”<sup>73</sup>

The fact that Arab uprisings shook regimes in rentier states, such as Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain, as well as semi-rentier Egypt, can be seen as disproving the rentier state model; however, three reasons indicate the opposite. First, non-rentier Tunisia is where the uprisings started and achieved most progress toward democratization. In several other cases, the uprisings have failed to overthrow the autocrat, reproduced autocracy, or led to chaos. Second, in Libya, it was a foreign force—NATO—who played the main role in deposing Muammar al-Gaddafi. This case, therefore, does not weaken the argument that rentier states are financially

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<sup>72</sup>Etel Solingen, “Pax Asiatica versus Bella Levantina: The Foundations of War and Peace in East Asia and the Middle East,” *American Political Science Review* 101 (November 2007): 757–780, at 761.

<sup>73</sup>Bellin, “Reconsidering the Robustness,” 144.

independent of citizens and use rents to buy loyalties, build security forces, and weaken civil society. Moreover, newly emerging democracy is very fragile in Libya. Last but not least, several rentier states, such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Algeria have avoided popular opposition using rentier revenues. As Gregory Gause stresses, these countries are “fortunate that the Arab uprisings occurred at the end of a ten-year period of relatively high oil prices.” Saudi Arabia, for example, “announced new commitments of over \$100 billion in domestic spending in the early months of 2011. The other Gulf rentiers made similar payouts to their citizens.” They provided “higher salaries for state employees, new government jobs ..., and new welfare benefits.”<sup>74</sup>

The rentier autocracies such as Saudi Arabia and Iran have not only successfully avoided uprisings at home but have also protected their authoritarian allies. Saudi Arabia has led a Sunni monarchical bloc that includes the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Jordan. This bloc has perceived the regional mood toward democratization as a threat and has tried to stop it. Saudi Arabia supported the uprising only in two cases: Libya (due to its peculiar distaste for Gaddafi) and Syria (due to sectarian reasons). Saudi Arabia and the UAE deployed 1,000 troops and 500 policemen, respectively, to Bahrain in order to support the kingdom against the popular protests. They also promised about \$12 billion to the military regime in Egypt right after the coup d'état against President Muhammad Morsi. The rival bloc is led by Iran and includes the Maliki government in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon. This bloc has primarily sustained the Assad regime in Syria by providing financial and military support. The survival of the Assad regime and the radicalization of the Syrian opposition by the increasing role of Al Qaeda affiliates have become major blows to the regional mood for change. In sum, Arab uprisings, which gained momentum through regional diffusion, have been reversed by these two blocs using almost the same means of regional diffusion.

## CONCLUSION

Analyzing the high rate of autocracies among Muslim-majority countries, this article reviews four main alternative explanations. First, it criticizes the perception that Islam promotes authoritarianism. Second, it emphasizes that the alleged lack of secularism, in terms of state–religion separation, is not the primary cause of authoritarianism in these countries. Third, it problematizes the claimed causal links between Muslim patriarchy and

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<sup>74</sup>Gause, “Kings for All Seasons,” 74.

authoritarianism. Finally, it notes that the Arab versus non-Arab difference does not explain the high rate of authoritarianism. Instead, the article develops an argument based on the combined effects of rentier states and regional diffusion. MENA is exceptionally authoritarian because authoritarian rentier states have dominated politics and economies in the region. Central Asian autocracies are part of the former Soviet Republics—which are mostly authoritarian due to the overlapping roles of rentier states and the Soviet legacy. Non-rentier Muslim-majority countries in other regions mostly follow the general trends of democracy or authoritarianism in their respective regions. In a nutshell, the article argues that it is not Islam, but geology and geography, that primarily lead to the disproportionate authoritarianism in Muslim-majority countries.

Nonetheless, the argument should not be understood as an attempt to replace cultural determinism with geological/geographical determinism. Although structural factors are important, human agency can still play a role in regime change by redesigning the relationship between the state and social forces. This article explains means of regional diffusion by mostly stressing deliberate policies of states (using the military, diplomacy, finance, and propaganda), instead of dispersed structural factors such as *zeitgeist*. Moreover, some Muslim-majority countries have relatively better Freedom House scores despite being rentier states (Malaysia and Nigeria), or being in MENA (Tunisia, Libya, Lebanon, and Morocco).

Given the theoretical framework of this article, there are two main possibilities for democratization in MENA and Central Asia. First, the share of rentier revenues in government revenues can permanently shrink as a result of the depletion of hydrocarbon reserves and rise of domestic consumption. That is what happened in Indonesia in the 1990s and 2000s and what is now happening in Bahrain. Further research is needed to examine how growing populations will complicate state–society relations in rentier states in these two regions by making clientelist policies much more expensive, while also expanding consumption and thus reducing hydrocarbon exportation.<sup>75</sup> The long-term decline of oil and gas prices can further challenge rentier states. In addition to these crisis scenarios, future studies on rentier states may also examine potential positive impacts of economic diversification on democratization.

Second, international (most probably Western) forces may help the opposition to overthrow dictators in some rentier states. As the Libyan experience

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<sup>75</sup>See Wittes, *Freedom's Unsteady March*, 41–47; Christopher M. Davidson, *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies* (New York: Oxford University Press), 111–117.

verified, although rulers of rentier states are very powerful against their own people, they are fragile against international forces, which can restrict their oil exportation, freeze their international assets, and destroy their military apparatuses. This international explanation is complementary with my regional analysis; examining international interactions rather than isolated regions resembles analyzing regional effects instead of isolated states.

If opposition forces in MENA and Central Asia seek to end authoritarian regimes, the most likely international allies for them will be the United States and EU countries, rather than Russia and China, who have supported the Assad regime. Paradoxically, however, Islamists are main opposition forces in Arab countries and they have expressed various levels of anti-Westernism. This is one of the reasons why Western governments did not sufficiently support the Arab uprisings. In fact, this is not a new dilemma. Although the United States and EU countries mostly supported democratization in other regions (especially Latin America and Eastern Europe in the 1980s and 1990s),<sup>76</sup> they have preferred to work with autocrats in MENA,<sup>77</sup> given their priorities of protecting Israel, stabilizing oil supply, avoiding Islamist regimes, and, more recently, fighting terrorism. Neither Western countries' "linkage" to, nor their "leverage" on MENA will be sufficient for a pro-democratic Western impact in the region,<sup>78</sup> unless there emerges a strong Western intention and will in this direction. A rapprochement between Arab Islamists and Western countries on a shared democratic vision<sup>79</sup> could create a new, truly regional wave of democratization in MENA, which could even affect Central Asia in the long run. A historical opportunity for such a rapprochement has been lost during the Arab uprisings, but it can reappear again in the future. Rentier states will raise strong and multiple barriers against such a regional transformation, but cannot make it impossible.\*

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<sup>76</sup>Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chaps. 3 and 4.

<sup>77</sup>Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism," 149; Jason Brownlee, *Democracy Prevention: The Politics of the U.S.-Egyptian Alliance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>78</sup>For the importance of Western "linkage" to and "leverage" on non-Western countries' democratization, see Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*.

<sup>79</sup>See Larry Diamond, "Why Are There No Arab Democracies?" *Journal of Democracy* 21 (January 2010): 93–104, at 102.

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