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# THE NEW RENTIERISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST: HOW GULF OIL WEALTH HAS KEPT DEMOCRACY AT BAY SINCE 2011

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First in 2011, and then again in 2019, the Middle East was engulfed by a wave of revolutionary movements. In a region that had long been seen as uniquely authoritarian, these movements appeared to augur the beginning of a new era; and indeed, many of the dictators that were targeted—in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Sudan—did step aside. But ultimately none of these uprisings produced flourishing democracies, leaving the Middle East just as autocratic today as it was prior to these two waves of uprisings. In Egypt, for example, a brief democratic transition was violently cut short by a counterrevolutionary coup that restored military rule. Here, as in other cases of failed revolution, domestic actors like military officers and crony capitalists were key to the return of authoritarianism. But their success was also enabled by a pair of powerful foreign actors: the oil-rich states of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

What accounts for the persistence of authoritarianism in the Middle East through fifteen years of mass pressure for political change? This Brief argues that the region's natural resource wealth has been a key factor contributing to the durability of its autocracies—though not for the reasons usually given. This natural resource wealth has empowered a small number of Middle Eastern states—particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE—that are deeply invested in preserving the authoritarian *status quo* and preventing neighboring democratic experiments from succeeding. These oil-rich states intervened in numerous uprisings during 2011 and 2019, bolstering autocratic incumbents with weapons and aid, undermining already fraught transitions, and fanning the flames of nascent civil wars.

This argument differs from the conventional wisdom regarding how natural resource abundance bolsters authoritarianism in the Middle East. These theories,

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which generally fall under the heading “rentierism,” posit that states with abundant oil and gas use the revenues from sales of these resources to mitigate calls for reform and fund their repressive apparatuses. This Brief proposes that since 2011, we have seen the emergence of a *new* form of Middle Eastern rentierism, according to which oil abundance bolsters autocracy not through the workings of domestic political economy but through mechanisms of international security and regional counterrevolution. This is not to say that oil-fueled interventions were the sole reason for the failure of these various revolutions, which were each multifaceted and complex. But if we look across the countries that experienced meaningful mass movements in 2011 and 2019, the one consistent factor contributing to failure in almost all of them was the intervention, both covert and overt, of regional oil-rich states. In short, the “new rentierism” offers one important explanation for why the Middle East has remained autocratic through these multiple waves of people power.

## NEW VERSUS CLASSIC RENTIERISM

For years, the Middle East has had the unfortunate distinction of being the most authoritarian region in the world. At the end of the Cold War, a host of longstanding autocracies in Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America were swept away in what came to be known as the “Third Wave” of democratization.<sup>1</sup> But the Middle East resisted these democratizing trends, presenting a puzzle of authoritarian persistence that became a major subject of debate among policymakers and political scientists in the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>2</sup>

The Arab Spring revolutions of 2011 seemed to mark the end of this authoritarian era. Dictators who had clung to power for decades were finally, if belatedly, receiving their comeuppance. First, Tunisia’s Zine el Abidine Ben Ali fell; then Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak, Yemen’s Ali Abdullah Saleh, and Libya’s Muammar Qaddafi. Democratic transitions began, elections were held, and new constitutions were written and for a time the region seemed to be headed in a new direction. But in the end, most of these transitions either failed to take flight or were cut short. The only project that yielded some success—in Tunisia—was terminated by an authoritarian autogolpe, or self-coup, in 2021. A second wave of uprisings in 2019 yielded similarly disappointing outcomes, with regimes either surviving mass challenges or restoring themselves via counterrevolution. A decade of popular mobilization and upheaval appears to have left the region almost exactly as it was—or, if anything, somewhat worse—with most countries governed by rejuvenated dictatorships or torn apart by civil war.

And so we return to the same puzzle and question: What explains the persistence of authoritarianism in the Middle East, even after a decade of mass mobilization for political change? Before the Arab Spring, one of the most widely cited

explanations for authoritarianism in the region was its unique abundance of oil and gas. This theory came to be known as “rentierism,” a name derived from works by Hossein Mahdavy, Hazem Beblawi, and Giacomo Luciani, which characterized states in the region as “rentier states.”<sup>3</sup> Though these arguments differ somewhat in their specifics, they generally emphasize three mechanisms.<sup>4</sup> The first, and most important, is that rentier states can afford to govern with less accountability and representation because they do not have to raise revenues through taxation and can use resource wealth to buy off their citizens. Whereas most authoritarian regimes must contend with societal demands for change, rentier states are largely relieved of these pressures. Second, rentier states can use oil wealth to fund robust repressive apparatuses, which protect their regimes from bottom-up threats. And third, oil-dependent countries get rich without developing the kind of socioeconomic structures that have long been associated with democracy, like an educated middle class.

The 2011 and 2019 revolutions called at least some core elements of this thesis into question. Oil-fueled state benefits had not rendered Middle Eastern societies quiescent; in fact, these societies were capable of giving rise to powerful movements for reform. This was true not just in the region’s resource-poor countries, like Tunisia and Egypt, but also in some of the oil-rich states that were at the core of rentier theories: Bahrain, Algeria, Libya, and Iraq.

But in other ways, the preponderance of oil in the region has indeed been central to the persistence of authoritarianism through 2011 and 2019. Whereas classic rentier theory focused on public financing and state-society relations, the last fifteen years have revealed a different but no less important set of mechanisms by which oil wealth keeps democracy at bay. A handful of resource-rich states have used their wealth to assert themselves as regional powers, aggressively reinforcing autocratic allies and resisting democratizing forces.

A small number of states are at the center of these new rentier dynamics: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, Qatar, and Kuwait. Though their levels of oil wealth vary, all of them have used these resources to pursue their geopolitical goals and oppose democratic change in neighboring states. Even among this set of actors, however, Saudi Arabia and the UAE stand apart: These two hyper-rentiers have used their astounding oil wealth to become the main regional agents of counterrevolution. Of course, this Brief is hardly the first to note the central

role these two states have played in resisting the 2011 revolutions.<sup>5</sup> But what is often unstated, and therefore left undertheorized, is that these states are able to exert such influence only on account of the extreme levels of wealth they have accumulated through global sales of natural resources. In other words, the regional counterrevolution since 2011 has been largely fueled by oil.

By and large, regional rentiers have deployed their oil wealth in three ways to resist and undermine revolutionary movements for change. First, they have provided funding or foreign aid to antidemocratic leaders or parties. Depending on the case, such actors have included wavering autocratic incumbents trying to survive revolutionary challenges as well as elites seeking to undermine democratic projects after regime change has occurred. Second, they have bolstered antidemocratic armed groups, either by transferring funds to enable them to purchase weapons and other equipment or by sending those armaments directly. In some cases, these armed groups have been involved in quelling protests; in others, they have contributed to derailing transitions or diverting nonviolent movements into armed civil wars. And third, in certain instances rentiers have come to the aid of antidemocratic allies by deploying their own armed forces, whose military capacities have been greatly enhanced over the last two decades owing to the purchase of state-of-the-art military equipment and professional training.

As the next section explains, the motivations for these interventions have been multifaceted: Opposition to democracy is one important consideration, but geopolitical gamesmanship and resisting the rise of threatening actors have been equally important. But regardless of motivation, their impacts have been quite consistent, and highly effective. In country after country, the support of regional rentiers has helped autocratic actors cling to power, restore themselves in office, or destroy the state.

Table 1 provides a summary of these new rentier interventions. For each country that experienced a major revolutionary movement in 2011 or 2019, it lists the outcome of the revolution (authoritarian survival, authoritarian restoration, or civil war/state collapse), the main rentier state(s) involved in opposing democratization, and which of the three strategies discussed above they deployed. As the table makes clear, all but one of these revolutionary movements was met with significant opposition from an oil-rich regional power. (The exception was Algeria.) The two hyper-rentiers, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have been the most

proactive regional actors, though Iran has also intervened in key cases when an allied government was threatened. Most of the time, rentier money was used to fund antidemocratic actors or armed groups, though four countries experienced direct armed intervention. In four countries, rentier interventions helped autocratic incumbents survive; in two, they helped new authoritarians rise to power (“authoritarian restoration”); and in four others, they contributed to the emergence of armed conflict.

**Table 1: Regional Rentiers in the 2011 and 2019 Revolutions**

Country	Year	Outcome of revolution	Rentier states opposing democracy	Direct foreign intervention	Funding for armed groups	Funding for autocratic leaders/parties
Bahrain	2011	Authoritarian survival	Saudi Arabia; UAE	✓		✓
Egypt	2011	Authoritarian restoration	Saudi Arabia; UAE; Kuwait			✓
Yemen	2011	Civil war/state collapse	Saudi Arabia; UAE	✓	✓	✓
Tunisia	2011	Authoritarian restoration	Saudi Arabia; UAE			✓
Libya	2011	Civil war/state collapse	Saudi Arabia; UAE	✓	✓	
Syria	2011	Civil war/state collapse	Iran (Saudi Arabia)	✓	✓	✓
Sudan	2019	Civil war/state collapse	Saudi Arabia; UAE		✓	✓
Algeria	2019	Authoritarian survival	N/A			
Iraq	2019	Authoritarian survival	Iran		✓	✓
Lebanon	2019	Authoritarian survival	Iran		✓	✓

The range of outcomes that these interventions have brought about points to a key difference between the old and new rentierism. Whereas in classic rentier theory, oil wealth was assumed to breed autocratic *stability*, with the new rentierism these riches are just as often used to sow disorder and destruction. For sure, Saudi Arabia and the UAE would prefer stable autocracies in their neighborhood—and in several cases they have used their resources to reinforce or establish such regimes. But if durable authoritarianism is not an option because popular movements have made it untenable, these states would much rather foment conflict and state breakdown than enable successful democracies to take root or their regional rivals to gain influence. In short, the new rentierism is more focused on opposing democracy than it is on preserving authoritarian order.

Of course, this is not to say that the new rentierism has been solely responsible for the litany of failures following 2011 and 2019. Each of these failures was unique, and in each case can be explained only by multicausal accounts that emphasize domestic as much as regional factors. In some cases (like Bahrain), rentier states likely played a decisive role; in others (like Tunisia), their contributions to democratic failure were more marginal. But it is certainly striking that in nine of these ten failures, the one common factor was rentier intervention aimed at empowering autocratic actors.

## **VIEW FROM THE GULF: SAUDI AND EMIRATI RESPONSES TO REGIONAL REVOLUTIONS**

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The leaders of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, like everyone else, were taken by surprise as revolutionary movements swept across the region in 2011. Over the previous decade, these powers had positioned themselves as leaders of a conservative, pro-Western bloc of Middle Eastern states, which included most of the monarchies as well as key republics like Egypt and Yemen. In this sense, there was some precedent for their deploying their oil wealth to pursue geopolitical goals in the region. These efforts had also taken on new urgency as the United States appeared to pull back from involvement in the Middle East, motivated in part by a shift of priorities toward East Asia and in part by a backlash in Washington against interventionist foreign policy. In response, Saudi Arabia and the UAE stepped forward, worrying that if they did not, the resulting vacuum would be filled by their main regional rival in Iran. In doing so, they established firm alliances with many of the incumbents that became targets of the 2011 movements, including Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen, and King Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa in Bahrain.

But geopolitical gamesmanship was not the only logic behind Riyadh's and Abu Dhabi's negative reactions to the Arab Spring revolutions; their hostility was also grounded in two more fundamental concerns. First, they viewed the establishment of successful democracies in the region as rebukes to their model of governance.<sup>6</sup> This model, which was honed over the 2000s, involves a paradoxical mix of political closedness and economic openness: an embrace of globalization while relying on oppression to maintain political control. These states had proudly put forward this model and begun exporting facets of it to their allies, who used it to reshape the suburbs of cities like Cairo and Amman.<sup>7</sup> Suddenly, though, an alternative governance model seemed possible: flourishing, multiparty democracies, capable of representing and responding to the interests of everyday citizens. Should such governments be allowed to take root, they would serve as a dangerous example, potentially inspiring Saudi and Emirati citizens to demand the same.

Second, Saudi Arabia and the UAE worried that these democracies might facilitate the rise of Islamist forces around the region. Since at least the 1970s, Islamist parties and movements have been the main political challengers to autocratic incumbents—and even though their participation in the 2011 uprisings was uneven, they appeared to be best positioned to take advantage

of the subsequent political openness. Indeed, these concerns appeared to be validated in several key cases, as Islamists dominated early elections in countries like Tunisia and Egypt. Leaders in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi worried that the rise of Islamist forces regionwide might bolster Islamist movements in their own countries. Though both countries embrace a conservative, state-sponsored version of Islam, local branches of the Muslim Brotherhood have long criticized these statist approaches and have organized against the royal families. In 2011, both countries' Brotherhood affiliates responded to the regionwide uprisings by calling for political reform, and were met with harsh crackdowns.<sup>8</sup>

These concerns explain why the responses of Saudi Arabia and the UAE to the two revolutionary waves were so consistently hostile, even when they targeted regimes to which these states had little fealty. Indeed, as the next section shows, though these countries launched forceful defenses of their allies in Manama, Cairo, and Sanaa, they also worked to undermine the democratic projects that replaced leaders with whom they did not have strong relations, like Tunisia's Ben Ali and Libya's Qaddafi.<sup>9</sup> Whether the former leader had been their close ally or not, they viewed any democratic success stories in the region, particularly ones in which Islamist parties would be able to rise to power, as serious existential threats.

## **OIL-FUELED INTERVENTIONS FOLLOWING THE 2011 REVOLUTIONS**

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Though they were unprepared for the 2011 uprisings, Saudi Arabia and the UAE quickly sprang into action, deploying their massive oil wealth to help crush or undermine the revolutionary movements. The most immediate oil-fueled intervention was in Bahrain. Leaders in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi viewed this uprising as particularly threatening, given Bahrain's close proximity to their borders, its membership in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and its shared status as a monarchy.<sup>10</sup> They also viewed it through the lens of sectarianism, framing it as a Shia movement against a Sunni ruling family (like themselves).<sup>11</sup>

Following the model of other Arab Spring revolutions, opposition activists in Bahrain initiated a sit-in at the Pearl Roundabout in central Manama, declaring that they would leave only when the King agreed to meaningful reforms, including elections and a transition to a constitutional monarchy. When the government's initial crackdowns proved insufficient to clear the

encampment, its leaders called on their Gulf allies for help.<sup>12</sup> Saudi Arabia and the UAE responded, deploying a contingent of the GCC's Peninsular Shield Force, including 1,000 Saudi military personnel and 500 Emirati police, across the causeway connecting Saudi Arabia to Bahrain. The intervention cowed the protesters and emboldened Bahraini security forces, who deployed brutal repression to clear the sit-in over the subsequent days. The GCC complemented this intervention by setting up a \$20 billion foreign aid fund to help Bahrain and Oman counteract dissent.<sup>13</sup>

Egypt was among Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's most important allies in the region, so the toppling of its president, Hosni Mubarak, in February 2011 came as a major blow. During the uprising, both countries had worked to create diplomatic space for Mubarak, lobbying the Obama administration not to pressure him to resign.<sup>14</sup> Having failed in these efforts, they immediately pivoted to focus on the emerging transition, seeking to empower actors who would preserve as much of the old authoritarian order as possible.<sup>15</sup>

The Muslim Brotherhood's political rise over the subsequent year and a half was precisely the scenario that Saudi Arabia and the UAE had feared most. Here you had one of the oldest and most influential Islamist movements in the region coming to power via genuine popular elections. Both countries deployed their considerable resources to undermine the administration of President Mohamed Morsi, which governed Egypt for a year starting in summer 2012. For example, both the Saudi and Emirati ambassadors worked the back rooms in Washington, attempting to sow doubt among U.S. officials that Morsi was a credible leader.<sup>16</sup> According to one senior official in Morsi's government, when Essam Haddad, the assistant for foreign policy, visited Abu Dhabi to meet with Emirati officials, he was told: "It doesn't matter who you are; the success of a democratic model in Egypt directly threatens our government."<sup>17</sup>

Saudi Arabia and the UAE also used their oil wealth to encourage and fund domestic opposition to Morsi's government. Though this opposition had genuine domestic roots, and was partly of Morsi's own making,<sup>18</sup> it was emboldened by this Gulf support. For example, the Emirati government provided funds to the Tamarod movement, which organized the protests on June 30, 2013, that set the stage for Morsi's ouster.<sup>19</sup> More importantly, both governments provided major diplomatic and financial backing to Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, the general who ousted Morsi in a coup three days after these protests. After withholding promised aid packages

during the transition and Morsi's term, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait all announced, a mere week after the coup, new aid packages to Egypt totaling \$12 billion.<sup>20</sup> El-Sisi has used this financial support to cement his rule, establishing a brutal autocracy that tolerates almost no political dissent.

In Yemen, too, Saudi Arabia and the UAE used their resources to finance and arm counterrevolutionaries, bringing about a terrible years-long civil war. When it became clear that they would be unable to save their client, President Ali Abdullah Saleh, they opted to take an active role in the subsequent transition, steering it in a direction that would preserve their core interests and their strong alliance with Yemen. They brokered an agreement in which Saleh handed over power to his vice president, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, who they hoped would establish a pliant government comprising many of the same political forces that had backed the Saleh regime and excluding key actors in the revolutionary coalition. They were particularly concerned about the Houthis, a Zaydi Shia political movement based in northern Yemen that had been fighting Saleh's government for years and had accused Saudi Arabia of providing him with funds to buy arms.<sup>21</sup> In an effort to support the nascent Hadi government, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE committed billions of dollars in foreign aid, including a particularly generous \$3.25 billion pledge from Saudi Arabia in 2012.<sup>22</sup>

But these efforts to establish a pliant successor to the Saleh regime in Yemen ended in dismal failure when, in early 2015, the Hadi government was toppled by the Houthi rebels. This was a nightmare scenario for both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and their counterrevolutionary efforts ramped up considerably. They launched a vicious military campaign, including tens of thousands of air strikes,<sup>23</sup> a ground intervention, and a devastating countrywide blockade, in an attempt to restore Hadi to power. They also provided weapons, training, and funding to the pro-Hadi armed forces and to various non-state militias opposed to the Houthis. Though this intervention has failed to topple the Houthi-led government, it has caused untold harm to Yemen's people and state institutions, killing an estimated 377,000 Yemenis<sup>24</sup> and bringing about what Human Rights Watch has called "one of the world's largest humanitarian crises."<sup>25</sup>

Three other countries saw major revolutionary movements in 2011: Tunisia, Libya, and Syria. In these cases, Saudi Arabia and the UAE had weaker or more hostile relations with the incumbent leaders, so they

did not invest directly in counterrevolutionary efforts to preserve or restore their regimes. Nevertheless, they have still deployed their oil wealth in all three countries in ways that have hindered prospects for democracy. In Tunisia, the transition initially played out much as it had in Egypt: The ouster of Ben Ali cleared space for the rise of the country's main Islamist opposition party, Ennahda, which both Saudi Arabia and the UAE viewed as a threat.<sup>26</sup> Lacking the kind of military partner they had found in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE set about backing and funding a political counterweight to Ennahda, the secularist Nidaa Tounes party, which reconstituted key elements of Ben Ali's former ruling party.<sup>27</sup> More importantly, both countries provided diplomatic and financial support for Tunisian president Kais Saied's authoritarian autogolpe in July 2021, which effectively ended the country's decade-long democratic experiment. They pledged to support Saied's government with foreign aid, and Saudi Arabia endorsed Saied's dissolution of the elected parliament.<sup>28</sup>

In Libya and Syria, the two Gulf hyper-rentiers helped to divert what began as nonviolent democratic revolutions into armed civil conflicts. Libya's democratic transition broke down in 2014, with a controversial election splitting the country into two camps. One side, which Saudi Arabia and the UAE opposed, was dominated by Islamists from the country's east. Saudi Arabia and the UAE instead threw their support behind the opposing camp, led by the military general Khalifa Haftar, who sought to become Libya's next strongman.<sup>29</sup> Saudi Arabia provided tens of millions of dollars to help Haftar launch an offensive on Libya's capital, Tripoli, which he used to secure the loyalty of tribes and pay for salaries and equipment in his Libyan National Army.<sup>30</sup> It also helped lobby U.S. president Donald Trump to back Haftar's campaign.<sup>31</sup> The UAE went even further: Not only did it provide money and military supplies to Haftar's army,<sup>32</sup> but it used its air base in Eastern Libya to carry out air strikes on his behalf.<sup>33</sup>

In Syria's 2011 uprising, the main foreign opponent of revolutionary forces was not Saudi Arabia or the UAE but their primary rival, Iran.<sup>34</sup> Still, even here, we see echoes of the dynamic in Libya, as early interventions by Saudi Arabia and the UAE on behalf of the opposition facilitated the transformation of an unarmed civic movement into an ethnic civil war.<sup>35</sup> Saudi Arabia in particular provided funds to a variety of sectarian militias whose goals, often inspired by Salafi Islamism, differed markedly from the democratic aspirations of the original mass movement.

## THE 2019 REVOLUTIONS AND GULF-BACKED COUNTERREVOLUTION IN SUDAN

In 2019, a second wave of revolutions swept across the Arab world, targeting incumbents in several countries that had escaped the 2011 wave: Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon. In some cases, Saudi Arabia and the UAE took a more passive role than they did in 2011. In Lebanon and Iraq, for example, protesters' most pointed demands were directed against actors within each government that were closely aligned with Iran (Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq). In these cases, then, it was Iran that intervened, as it sought to shield its proxies from the revolutionary movements. Still, these interventions were funded at least partly by Iran's oil sales, which are a major source of the government's revenues and therefore represent another manifestation of the new rentierism.<sup>36</sup>

In Sudan's revolution, Saudi Arabia and the UAE played much the same role that they did in 2011, aggressively deploying a combination of the strategies that they had honed during this earlier wave. In the years before the revolution, these Gulf states had forged a strong alliance with Sudan's incumbent president, Omar al-Bashir, despite his long-standing domestic partnership with Sudan's main Islamist movement.<sup>37</sup>

In the early 2010s, Sudan's own oil revenues plummeted following the independence of South Sudan, where many of its reserves had been located, and Bashir's government began seeking out new sources of revenue. It forged a partnership with the UAE to significantly increase its gold mining, and Abu Dhabi invested substantially in the country's gold sector. Bashir also agreed to provide Sudanese troops to support the Gulf intervention in Yemen, in exchange for paying soldiers' salaries, direct aid transfers, and sales of subsidized commodities.<sup>38</sup> Many of these mercenary troops came from the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a state paramilitary force that had formerly been involved in war crimes in Darfur. During the Sudanese revolution, the leader of the RSF, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (known as Hemedti), boasted of the money he had received during the Yemeni civil war and visited both Saudi Arabia and the UAE before deploying his troops to crack down on protesters.<sup>39</sup> These states also provided strong support for the Transitional Military Council (TMC), the junta that took over from Bashir when he resigned in April 2019. Shortly after this junta took power, Saudi Arabia and the UAE announced an aid package for Sudan worth \$3 billion.

Sudan's protesters refused to accept these military rulers, and in the summer of 2019 they forced the TMC to accept a democratic transition, whereby the country would be steered to elections by an interim government of military leaders and civilians from the revolutionary coalition. But Saudi Arabia and the UAE worked to ensure that Sudan's transition would fare no better than the transitions attempted after 2011. They used their diplomatic and financial leverage to undermine the civilians and empower the generals in the transitional government.<sup>40</sup> And they were quietly supportive of the counterrevolutionary coup that cut the transition short in 2021. After the coup, they continued to plow money and arms into Sudan, though they lined up behind different factions within the Sudanese security establishment. The UAE doubled down on its alliance with Hemedti and the RSF, who guaranteed the Emirates' continued access to Sudan's gold mines. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia threw its support behind General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the head of the Sudanese Armed Forces. Then, in April 2023, the RSF and the Sudanese Armed Forces fell out and began fighting each other, and the two Gulf allies now found themselves backing opposite sides in a bloody civil war that has destroyed Khartoum and much of the rest of the country.

## CONCLUSION

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For years, analysts have pointed to the Middle East's oil wealth as a primary reason for the durability of its dictatorships. Conventional wisdom held that oil riches insulated Middle Eastern rulers from societal pressures, enabling them to shower their citizens with perks and buy off potential opponents. The uprisings of the last decade and a half have raised serious questions about this aspect of the "rentier" thesis. But this Brief has argued that oil is indeed key to explaining the resilience of authoritarianism throughout this turmoil—only not for the reasons cited in classic rentier theory. Instead, the new rentierism in the Middle East operates through the antidemocratic machinations of a small number of states rich in natural resources. These states have become muscular actors in the region, mobilizing their wealth to fund foreign aid and buy military equipment that has then been deployed to defeat or reverse democratic revolutions.

Looking forward, one question is how rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the UAE may result in a change of direction. First in Yemen and then in Sudan, these two states have found themselves backing domestic actors that began as counterrevolutionary allies before becoming rivals and turning their guns against each

other. If Riyadh and Abu Dhabi continue this practice of funding opposing proxy forces, the effectiveness of their interventions may wane. Still, it is not as though either state—or even their rivals in Tehran and Doha—are backing *democratic* actors. Though in different cases these states may find themselves on opposite sides of a given conflict, they all consistently support forces of autocracy against those that advocate for change.

The political trends in the Middle East over the last two decades in many ways parallel those observed elsewhere in the world. A period of political dynamism and openness beginning in 2011 was quickly cut short by a resurgence of dictatorship, just as authoritarianism and right-wing populism have been on the rise globally. The new rentierism has been a major contributor to this resurgence, fueling the rise of regional powers like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iran, all of whom have been eager to step into the vacuum left by U.S. disengagement.

As this retrenchment continues and the world becomes more multipolar, these rising powers will likely have even greater leeway to assert their influence. Ultimately, whether they can be countered or restrained may come down to the tenacity of future revolutionary movements. Having learned the lessons of 2011 and 2019, these movements may prove more adept at resisting the foreign machinations of regional rentiers, guarding their nascent governments against outside influence and preventing oil money from corrupting their democratic experiments.

## ENDNOTES

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2. For good discussions of this "puzzle," see: Jason M. Brownlee, "[Low Tide after the Third Wave: Exploring Politics under Authoritarianism](#)," *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 4 (July 2002): 477–98, and Eva Bellin, "[The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective](#)," *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 2 (January 2004): 139–57.
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4. These are best summarized in Michael L. Ross, "[Does Oil Hinder Democracy?](#)" *World Politics* 53, no. 3 (April 2001): 325–61.
  5. See, for example, Jonathan Fenton-Harvey, "[Regional Uprisings Confront Gulf-Backed Counterrevolution](#)," *Middle East Report*, no. 292/293 (Fall/Winter 2019); Toby Matthiesen, "The Arab Counter-Revolution: The Formation of a Regional Alliance to Undermine the Arab Spring," in *Struggles for Political Change in the Arab World: Regimes, Oppositions, and External Actors after the Spring*, ed. Lisa Blaydes, Amr Hamzawy, and Hesham Sallam (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022), 392–407; and Mehran Kamrava, "[The Arab Spring and the Saudi-Led Counterrevolution](#)," *Orbis* 56, no. 1 (January 1, 2011): 96–104.
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  9. For more on the way in which prior relationships conditioned the intensity of Saudi Arabia's response to the uprisings, see Oisín Tansey, Kevin Koehler, and Alexander Schmotz, "[Ties to the Rest: Autocratic Linkages and Regime Survival](#)," *Comparative Political Studies* 50 (9), 122–54.
  10. Fenton-Harvey, "Regional Uprisings Confront Gulf-Backed Counterrevolution," and Tansey, Koehler, and Schmotz, "Ties to the Rest."
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  12. "[Bahrain 'Asks for Gulf Help'](#)," Al Jazeera, March 14, 2011.
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