Democracy, Ethnic Exclusion, and Civil Conflict:

The Arab Spring Revolutions from a Global Comparative Perspective

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How have patterns of ethnic exclusion and discrimination evolved around the world, and specifically in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region before and after the Arab Spring? How do these developments affect ethnic civil war, and are there any links to processes of democratization? In this contribution, we present some tentative answers to these questions, using the newly updated *Ethnic Power Relations* (EPR) Dataset Family (Vogt et al. Forthcoming), which extends previous versions of the data until 2013 and introduces a new coding of regional autonomy regimes for ethnic groups.

The revolutions of the so-called Arab Spring constitute the most significant instances of political upheaval and regime change in the last decade. On the one hand, they have toppled some of the most resilient dictatorial rulers of the world. On the other hand, some of the popular uprisings have ushered in protracted civil conflicts, causing tremendous human suffering, as in Syria, for example. These revolutions and the current situation are also significant because they raise the issue of the feasibility of achieving peaceful coexistence of different ethnic – mainly religious – groups within democratically constituted polities in a region that has not only been a laggard with regard to protecting democratic rights, but also in terms of entrenched policies and practices of ethnic exclusion and discrimination. Apart from the eth-

nically more homogeneous population of Tunisia, most states in the region are divided by ethnic cleavages, comprising important religious and/or linguistic minorities. In contrast to a long-lasting, worldwide trend towards ethnically inclusive governments, on the eve of the Arab Spring many regimes in the MENA region continued to rely on the dominance of specific ethnic groups, to the exclusion of others. Thus, the introduction of democratic rule in the region may result in what one observer called a "fragmentation bomb" (Gardner 2012).

Although the events of the Arab Spring are still of recent memory, making an evaluation of the outcomes tentative at best, political instability and violence along ethno-religious cleavages have indeed been observed with regularity throughout the MENA region. After the collapse of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in 2011 led to competitive elections in 2012, Libya has descended into civil war with little semblance of central governance. A similar sequence transpired in Yemen: the resignation of Ali Abdullah Salei in 2012 led to a transitional government, headed by a consensus candidate for the presidential election, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, who was then ousted by a sectarian rebellion that has turned into full-scale civil war. Other cases (for example, Bahrain and Syria) only flirted with political openings, while exhibiting varying degrees of violence ranging from brutal repression of opposition mobilization to severe violent conflict – all marked by a pronounced ethnic overtone.

Scholars analyzing the events of the Arab Spring have mainly focused on political institutions and the role of civil society movements (see, e.g., Lynch 2014b; for an overview see also Lynch 2014a). Similarly, classic explanations of the link between democratic transitions and political violence have emphasized the role of institutional weakness (Huntington 1968; Mansfield and Snyder 2002). In contrast, we argue that ethnic inclusion is a prerequisite for peaceful transitions from authoritarian to democratic regimes. Our analysis of the updated EPR Dataset Family reveals a clear relationship between ethnic exclusion and ethnic civil war in the MENA region in the past. From this perspective, the violent unraveling of the popular movements of the Arab Spring cannot come as a surprise. In the light of our findings, the con-

tinuing high levels of ethnic exclusion in the MENA region after the Arab Spring are alarming. They suggest that the future of these states is likely to be shaped by how they will manage inter-ethnic relations in the face of potential future democratization.

Democracy and Ethnic Inclusion: The MENA Region in a Global Comparison

Before the revolutionary political changes, the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) constituted the most repressive and undemocratic region in the world.[1] Whereas other parts of the world have successively either caught up with the high level of democracy observed across the advanced industrial countries or joined in the democratic improvements experienced by many developing countries, most states in the MENA region experienced little if any democratization. As Figure 1 shows, the Arab World has been – for nearly two decades – the only region where the average level of democracy falls below the midpoint of the standard Polity IV scale (Gurr, Jaggers, and Moore 1989), lagging well behind the changes in every other region. Despite a modest positive trend since 1980, more countries in the MENA region continue to lean towards strong authoritarianism than towards democracy.

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[1] See Appendix I for a list of all countries considered to be part of the MENA region in this study. The table also shows the regional classification of all other countries.

Figure 1: Regional trends in levels of democracy
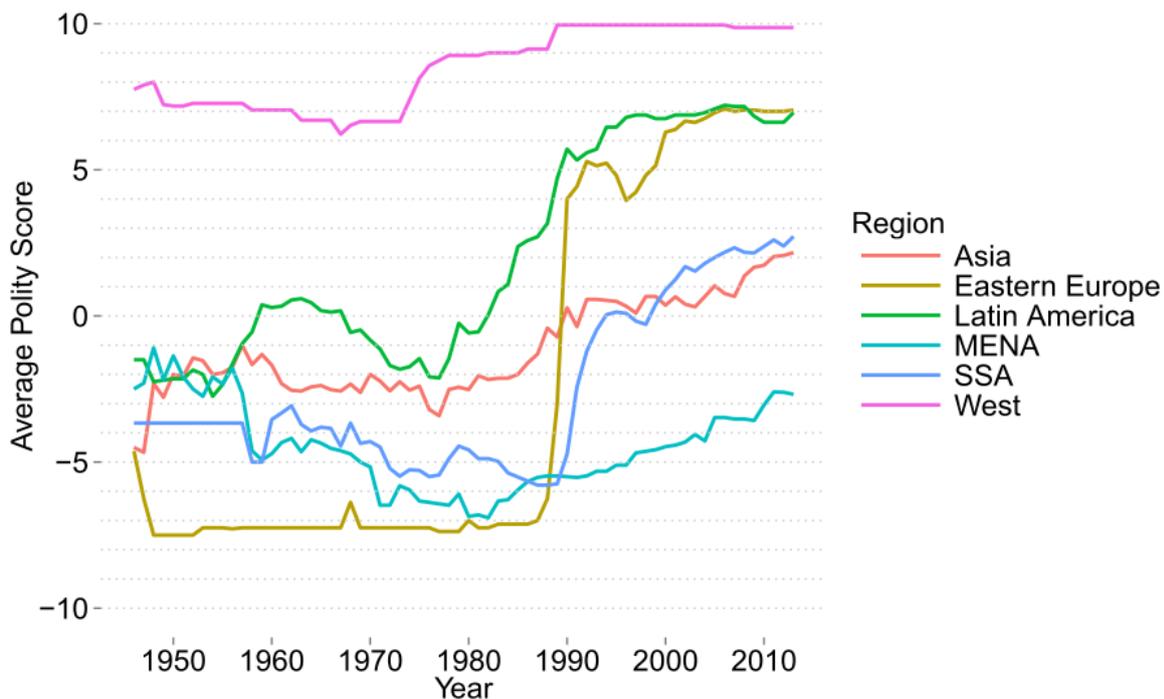
Notes: Based on the Polity IV index (Gurr, Jaggers, and Moore 1989). The figure shows the average Polity values of all countries in a given region from 1946 to 2013.

The countries in the MENA region are also laggards in terms of the political inclusion of ethnic groups. Figures 2 and 3 show the average levels of ethnic exclusion and discrimination, relying on the updated EPR Core Dataset (Vogt et al. Forthcoming), for the same world regions as displayed in Figure 1 over the period from 1946 to 2013. The EPR data distinguish between politically *included and excluded* groups based on group leaders' access to national executive power.[2] Ethnic discrimination is a particularly severe subtype of exclusion, defined by EPR as the active, intentional, and targeted discrimination of members of specific ethnic groups, with the intent of excluding them from political power based on their ethnic identity.[3]

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[2] The EPR dataset is arguably the most comprehensive data source on ethnic group inclusion, covering the whole time period since World War II up to 2013 and, thus, going clearly beyond the temporal reach of other datasets on ethnic group political representation. For example, Ruedin's (2013) data on descriptive representation in legislatures only covers a single year, while the discrimination indicators of the Minorities at Risk (MAR) dataset are available from 1980 on (Minorities at Risk Project 2003). Moreover, although MAR offers a very detailed measurement of different types of discrimination, it is less precise on ethnic groups' political representation.

[3] For a more precise description of the EPR data and the power statuses of ethnic groups, see the corresponding chapter in *Peace and Conflict 2014* (Cederman, Girardin, and Wucherpfennig 2014).

Figures 2 and 3 rely on aggregated country-level measures indicating the relative size of politically excluded or discriminated ethnic groups as a share of the overall population.

Figure 2: Regional levels of ethnic exclusion over time
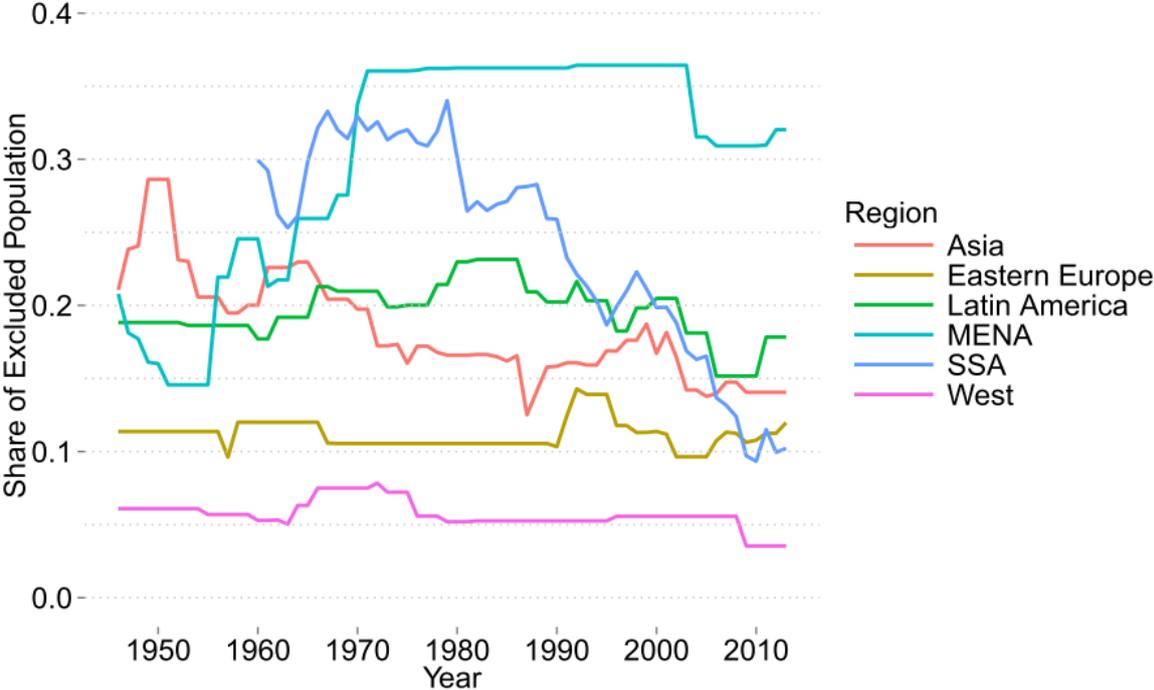
Notes: Based on the EPR Core Dataset (Vogt et al. Forthcoming). The figure shows the regional average values of the relative size of politically excluded ethnic groups as a share of the total country population between 1946 and 2013.

Figure 3: Regional levels of ethnic discrimination over time
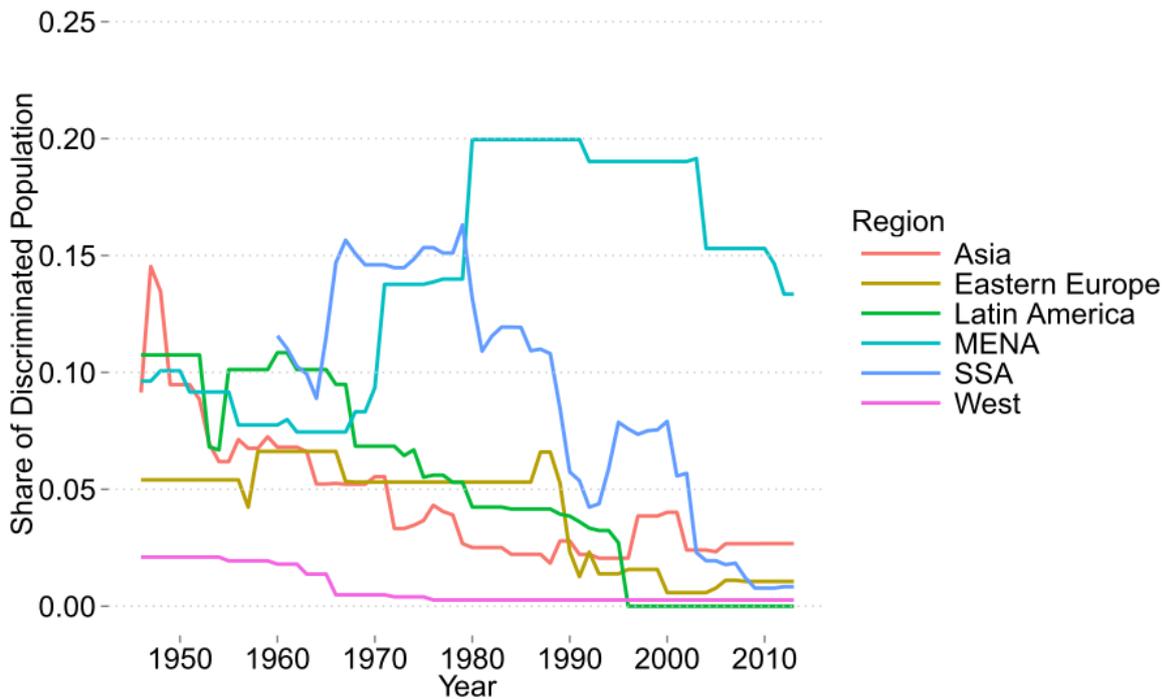
Notes: Based on the EPR Core Dataset. The figure shows the regional average values of the relative size of politically discriminated ethnic groups as a share of the total country population between 1946 and 2013.

In terms of the broader measure of exclusion, the world regions fall into three clusters. The West – defined here as Western Europe, plus Cyprus and the former colonies of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States – has been characterized by consistently low levels of ethnic exclusion since World War II, according to the EPR dataset. Latin America, Asia, Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa are situated at the intermediate level. The abrupt initiation of democratization in Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 1990s also led to a considerable increase in ethnic exclusion in that region. After experiencing decades of high levels of ethnic exclusion after independence and during the Cold War, Sub-Saharan Africa entered the intermediate category after 1990, exhibiting the steepest decrease on this measure of any region. Hence, the impact of democratization on ethnic inclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa differed significantly from the pattern observed in Eastern Europe around the same time. The Arab World exhibits the highest values of ethnic exclusion. The MENA region experi-

enced a notable decrease in the degree of ethnic exclusion *before* the Arab Spring, as a result of power-sharing arrangements adopted in Sudan and in Iraq after the US-led invasion. Following the Arab Spring, ethnic exclusion increased slightly, although it is still too early to judge whether this constitutes the beginning of a systematic trend similar to the developments in Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 1990s. Overall, the regimes of these countries still exclude groups that, on average, make up over a third of the population from access to national state power based on ethnic identity.

The picture becomes even gloomier when we examine the more narrow measure of ethnic discrimination. Ethnic discrimination, as defined by the EPR data, is almost completely absent in the West, while Sub-Saharan Africa again has experienced the steepest decrease in ethnic discrimination over the last decades. The values in the MENA region have been much higher than those of all other world regions since the early 1980s. In the 2000s, levels of discrimination decreased somewhat, mostly due to the end of Saddam Hussein's rule in Iraq and smaller improvements in Libya at the beginning of the Arab Spring. Nevertheless, ethnic discrimination in the region is actually still more prevalent today than it was 70 years ago and, on average, still affects substantial portions of these countries' populations.

Figures 4 and 5 show the levels of ethnic exclusion and discrimination for each country of the MENA region in 2013.[4] Almost all countries in the region exclude at least some ethnic minorities from access to meaningful political power at the national level. Among the conspicuous examples is the highly exclusionary Assad dictatorship in Syria, which is completely based on Assad's fellow Shia Alawites. More than half the countries discriminate against an ethnically defined section of their population. Certain cases are particularly striking: two ethnic groups that experience discrimination, Shia Arabs in Bahrain and Palestinians in Jordan, make up more than 50 percent of their respective countries' populations.

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[4] EPR treats the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as *de facto* parts of Israel and Western Sahara as part of Morocco.

Figure 4: Share of the Excluded Population in 2013
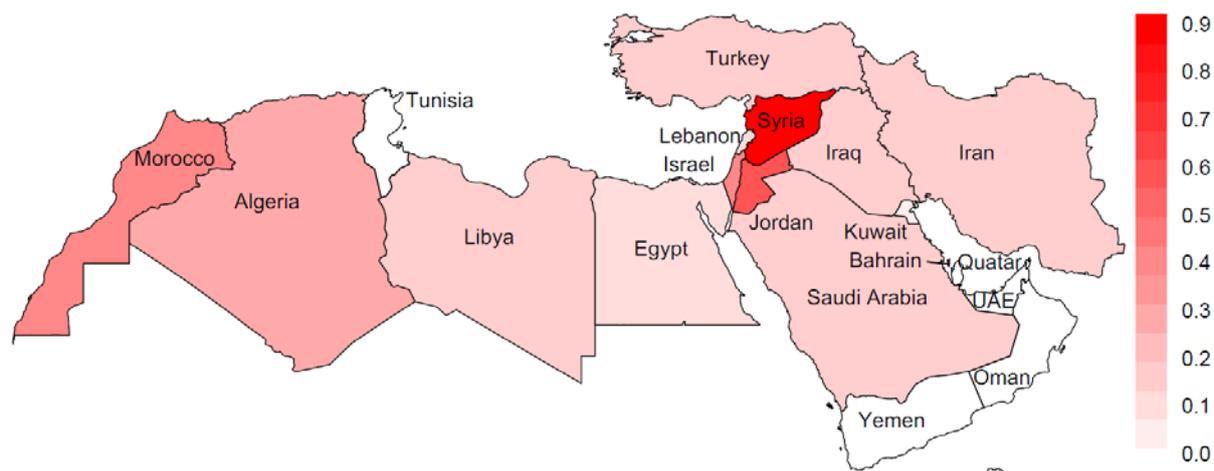
Notes: According to the EPR Core Dataset. The exclusion values are aggregate country-level measures indicating the relative size of politically excluded ethnic groups as a share of the total country population.

Figure 5: Share of the Discriminated Population in 2013
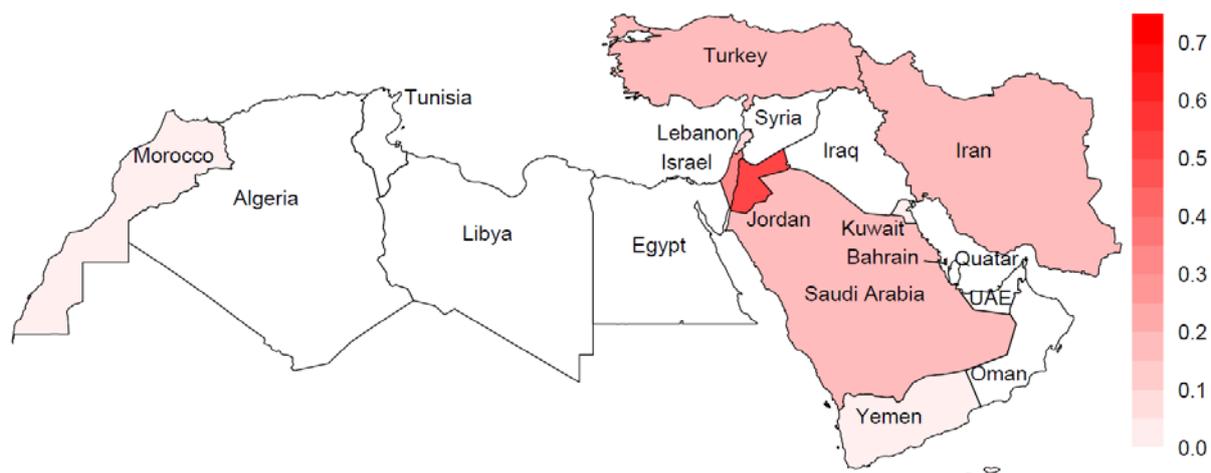
Notes: According to the EPR Core Dataset. The discrimination values are aggregate country-level measures indicating the relative size of politically discriminated ethnic groups as a share of the total country population.

Ethnic exclusion and discrimination are not uniquely Arab or Muslim phenomena within the MENA region. A number of the most severe instances of ethnic exclusion occur between different Arab groups or Muslim denominations – for example, Alawite Shia and other Arab groups in Syria, Jordanians and Palestinian Arabs in Jordan, and Shia and Sunni Muslims in

Bahrain. Yet ethnic exclusion is also pronounced in Israel, Turkey, and Iran, where non-Arabs exclude and discriminate against Arabs, Kurds, and other minorities. Historically, this has led to a higher frequency of violent conflict across linguistic, rather than religious, divisions in the MENA region (Bormann, Cederman, and Vogt Forthcoming). Moreover, as the examples of Israel and Turkey demonstrate, democratic institutions do not ensure ethnic equality in all cases. To the contrary, the dominance of the ethnic majority at the ballot box often brings about democracy's dark side (Mann 2005).

Finally, the updated EPR Core Dataset also allows us to compare regional trends in ethnic autonomy provisions. Previous versions of EPR coded regional autonomy status as a subcategory of exclusion at the national level. The 2014 version introduces a new dichotomous *regional autonomy* variable, which is coded for both excluded and power-sharing groups.[5] For a group to be coded as regionally autonomous, the circumstances must jointly satisfy three conditions (Vogt et al. Forthcoming):

1. A meaningful and active regional executive organ that operates below the state level (for example, the departmental, provincial, or district level), but above the local administrative level, must exist.[6]

2. This regional entity must have *de facto* (as opposed to mere *de jure*) political power.

3. Group representatives must exert actual influence on the decisions of this entity, acting in line with the group's local interests.

The Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq is an example of meaningful political power at the sub-state level that is coded as regional autonomy in the new EPR Core Dataset (Katzman 2010).

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[5] Note that the autonomy dimension is not coded for "monopoly" and "dominant" groups, since their political interests are assumed to be sufficiently represented at the level of the central state. Figure 6 shows the relative size of groups with regional autonomy, as a share of all groups eligible for autonomy.

[6] Here, "meaningful" refers to executive organs that carry out core competencies of the state, involving, for example, cultural rights (language and education) and/or significant economic autonomy (e.g., the right to levy taxes, or very substantial spending autonomy).

Figure 6 reveals that the MENA region also ranks last in terms of ethnic autonomy, although the disparity relative to other world regions is less pronounced than with the other indicators discussed earlier. Autonomy provisions are even less frequent in the MENA region than in Sub-Saharan Africa, which has been identified as possessing few favorable conditions for the enactment of ethnic autonomy (Mozaffar and Scarritt 1999). Yet, in the face of the centrifugal forces unleashed by the current ethno-religious violence, most importantly by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), ethno-federalist formulae may be a crucial institutional tool to hold together the multi-ethnic polities in the MENA region and to offer guarantees to discontented minorities in the future (Gardner 2014). At the other end of the scale, established democracies in the West provide the most autonomy to ethnically distinct groups. In Eastern Europe, a frontrunner in terms of ethnic autonomy rights during the Cold War, the demise of the communist regimes and the formation of ethnically more homogenous nation states not only increased the levels of ethnic exclusion in the central government, but also abrogated many autonomy regimes. The other meaningful trend over the past twenty years concerns states in Latin America that extended autonomy to many indigenous groups (González 2010; Van Cott 2001, 2007).

Figure 6: Regional trends in ethnic autonomy provisions
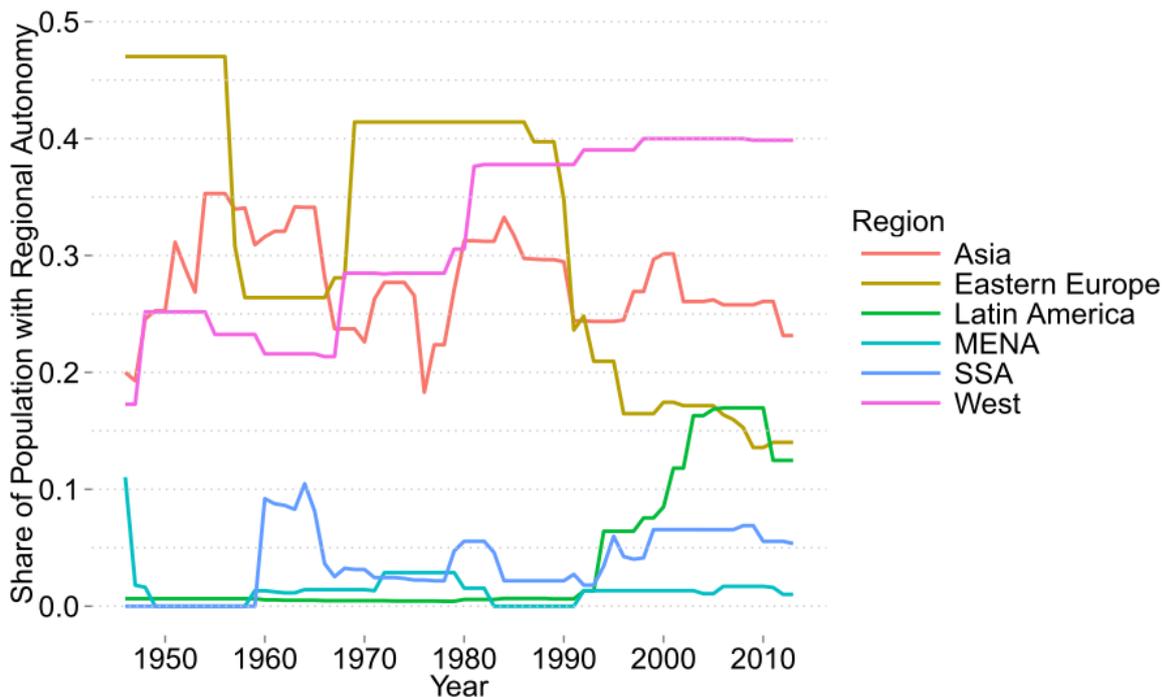
Notes: Based on the regional autonomy variable of the EPR Core Dataset. The figure shows the regional average values of the relative size of groups with regional autonomy as a share of all groups eligible for autonomy (i.e. excluding monopoly and dominant groups) between 1946 and 2013.

Ethnic Exclusion and Civil Conflict

How do patterns of ethnic exclusion relate to the outbreak of civil war – arguably the most important form of political violence since World War II (Gleditsch et al. 2002)? Using data from the updated EPR Dataset Family covering the period from 1946 to 2013, our analyses reaffirm existing findings that link ethnic exclusion to a higher risk of ethnic conflict both globally and for the MENA region in particular.

Specifically, we estimate the probability of civil war onset for each ethnic group-year, relying on the ACD2EPR dataset, which identifies ethnic conflicts by linking EPR groups to rebel organizations from the 2014 version of UCDP/PRIO's Armed Conflict Database (Gleditsch et al. 2002; Themnér and Wallensteen 2014).[7] Figure 7 displays the most important

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[7] In the ACD2EPR dataset, a rebel organization is linked to an ethnic group from the EPR Core Dataset if it both recruited fighters from the ethnic group *and* made public claims on behalf of it (Wucherpfennig et al. 2012).

results from our logistic regression analysis for both the global sample of countries (black) and a sub-sample composed of all countries in the MENA region (grey).[8] Holding all other variables at their respective means, medians, or modes, we computed the predicted probability of ethnic civil war onset by moving the three variables from "0" to "1".[9] The results make clear that the likelihood of engaging in ethnic rebellions is significantly greater among politically excluded ethnic groups, groups that experienced a recent downgrading of their power status, and groups with a history of conflict with the state. While the estimated results are less precise for the far smaller sample of ethnic groups in the MENA region,[10] they are consistent with the global pattern. Indeed, 37 of 46 (80%) recorded ethnic conflicts in that region were fought by excluded ethnic groups. In short, these results suggest that the violent rebellions of the past four years in Syria, Iraq, and other states of the region are both reflections of broader global patterns that link ethnic exclusion to ethnic conflict and recurrences of historical experiences in the region.

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[8] Our logit models include various commonly used control variables, such as relative group size, logged measures of GDP per capita and population figures from Hunziker and Bormann (2013), as well as cubic peace years (Carter and Signorino 2010). All ongoing conflicts are dropped from the analysis, and we only code new onsets when there is at least a two-year intermission in fighting. Full regression results are provided in the Appendix to this article.

[9] The predicted probabilities and 95% confidence intervals were calculated with simulation methods using Clarify (King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000). Replication code is available on request from the authors.

[10] The error term on the downgrading variable is extremely large and the effect of the variable is statistically insignificant, mainly because there were only very few such instances in the MENA region during the time period under observation.

Figure 7: Ethnic exclusion and ethnic conflict around the World and in the Middle East, 1946-2013 – Group Level
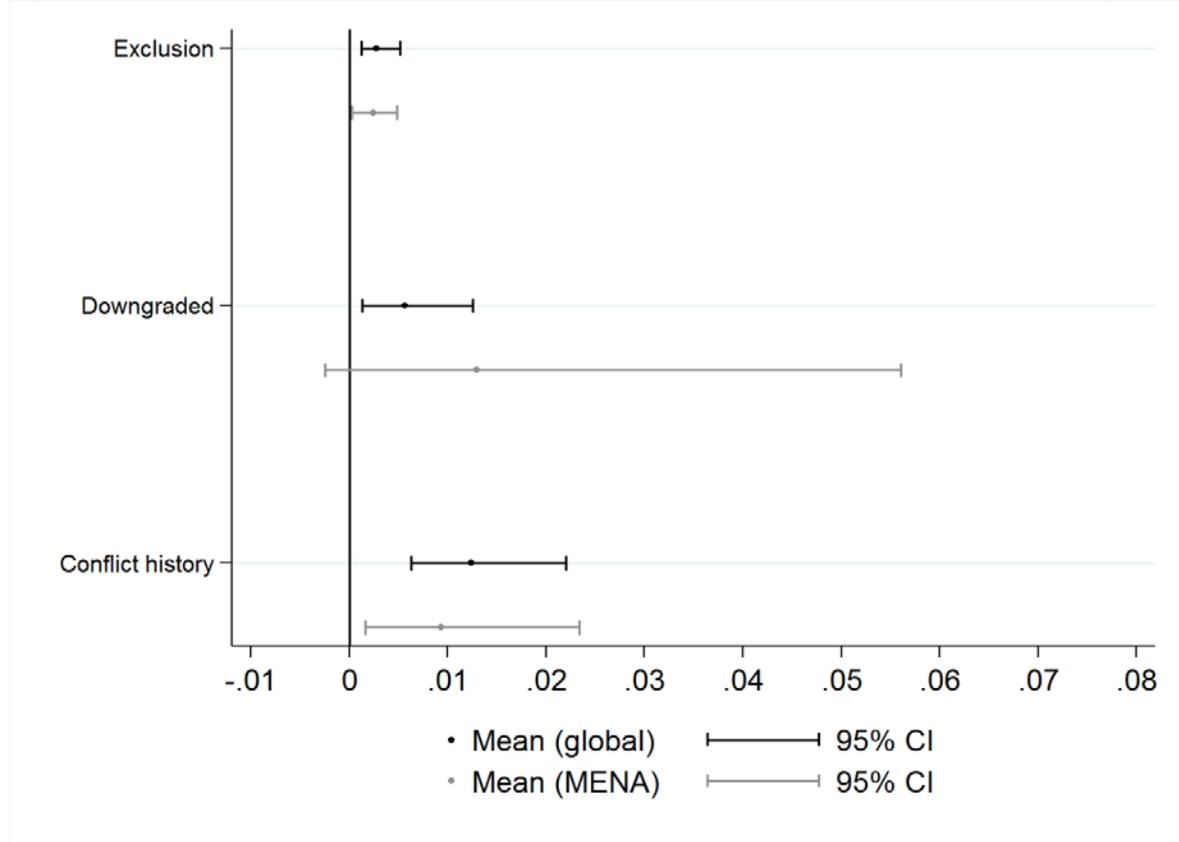
Focusing on years of ethnic conflict incidence, Table 1 shows that the group-level relationship between exclusion and ethnic conflict risk also holds at the country level across the MENA region. Countries that exclude larger relative shares of their population because of their ethnic identity experience more and longer spells of ethnic conflict. In this regard, Iraq and Iran lead the way, with six civil war onsets each. Countries with the highest levels of exclusion fight internal challengers during more than a third of their existence, whereas countries in the middle category spend about 20% of their country-years fighting, and states with the lowest levels of exclusion experience civil war in about 6% of all years. These numbers even understate the true extent of conflict as multiple challenges can occur at the same time but are only counted once. Syria constitutes somewhat of an outlier as it only experienced three onsets during the period of observation, which is surprising given its extremely high level of exclusion.[11]

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[11] The current civil war might unfortunately bring it closer to its expected count. Also note that the first conflict occurred in a period marked by low levels of exclusion.

Table 1: Ethnic exclusion and ethnic conflict incidence in the Middle East – Country Level

Share of excluded population	No ethnic conflict	Incidence Years	Share of conflict years	Conflict Onsets
High (>=40%)	223	125	35.92%	Morocco 1975; Israel 2000; Sudan 1963, 1983, 2011; Syria 1979, 2011; Iraq 1973, 1982, 1987, 1991, 1995
Medium (>=10%)	333	93	21.83%	Lebanon 1958, 1989; Israel 1949; Iran 1946, 1966, 1979, 1993, 1996, 2005; Iraq 1958, 1961, 1963; Turkey 1984
Low (<10%)	221	13	5.56%	Iraq 2004; Syria, 1966; Yemen 1948, 1962, 1979, 1994
Total	**777**	**231**	**22.92%**	

Note: Numbers refer to country years. Fisher's exact test significant (p=0.000) for the degree of ethnic exclusion and conflict incidence.

Of the various instances of political violence following the Arab Spring, the ACD2EPR dataset only codes the Kurdish uprising in Syria as a case of ethnic civil war. This is partly a consequence of the ethnically inclusive and non-elite nature of anti-regime protests in fully or almost homogeneous states such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, which did not involve claims on behalf of any ethnic group. Moreover, protests in Bahrain, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia, which did exhibit a clear ethnic dimension, either did not surpass the battle-death criterion of UCDP or are classified as episodes of one-sided violence because only the state used violence. Finally, the ACD2EPR dataset does not code the current civil war in Iraq, which pits Sunnis against the central government, as a new conflict outbreak, but rather considers it as part of the same conflict that has been ongoing since 2004. It is clear, however, that in the Arab monarchies and in Iraq dissatisfaction among members of excluded groups is on the rise (see, e.g., Wehrey 2014). Indeed, even the fundamentalist ISIS may be best understood as a reaction by the marginalized Sunni community to Shi'a dominance in Iraq (Adnan and Reese 2014). The high levels of exclusion in states such as Jordan, Israel, and Morocco, as well as the very fragile situation of the entire MENA region, make additional ethnic conflict in currently peaceful countries quite likely.

Conclusions

The states in the Middle East and North Africa stand out as the most repressive regimes in the world with respect to ethnic power relations. Recent popular uprisings in the Arab region have toppled some of the most resilient dictatorial rulers of the world and are challenging the region's predominantly authoritarian political orders. Yet the decade-long exclusion of many minority and majority groups from political power has not been resolved by these democratic movements and, in fact, may block future attempts of genuine democratization. Some of the ethnically more homogeneous states, such as Tunisia and – for a short time – Egypt, embarked on major democratic reforms. Meanwhile, the countries marked by the highest degrees of ethnic exclusion or discrimination, including Bahrain and Syria, experienced violent uprisings that were either repressed or spiraled into protracted civil conflict.

The relationship between ethnic exclusion and conflict is not unique to the MENA region, but rather follows a global pattern. Politically excluded ethnic groups are significantly more likely to start ethnic rebellions than included groups. Thus, ethnic exclusion can also be expected to be a very risky political strategy on the part of rulers in this region. This suggests that ethnic inclusion and minority rights must be a central political and institutional concern if the new regimes emerging from the Arab Spring actually aspire to consolidate their democratization efforts. Concretely, this means that possibilities of political participation should be distributed equally among the population at large – independent from ethnic identity – and broad-based inter-ethnic coalitions at the elite level during this phase of political transformations will be particularly important.

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Appendix I: Regional Classification of Countries

Region	Country	Region	Country
Asia	Afghanistan		Russia
	Bangladesh		Serbia
	Bhutan		Serbia and Montenegro
	Cambodia		Slovakia
	China		Slovenia
	Fiji		Ukraine
	India	Latin America	Argentina
	Indonesia		Bolivia
	Japan		Brazil
	Kazakhstan		Chile
	Kyrgyzstan		Colombia
	Laos		Costa Rica
	Malaysia		Cuba
	Mongolia		Ecuador
	Myanmar		El Salvador
	Nepal		Guatemala
	Pakistan		Guyana
	Philippines		Honduras
	Republic of Vietnam		Mexico
	Singapore		Nicaragua
	Sri Lanka		Panama
	Taiwan		Paraguay
	Tajikistan		Peru
	Thailand		Trinidad and Tobago
	Turkmenistan		Uruguay
	Uzbekistan		Venezuela
	Vietnam	MENA	Algeria
Eastern Europe	Albania		Bahrain
	Armenia		Egypt
	Azerbaijan		Iran
	Belarus		Iraq
	Bosnia and Herzegovina		Israel
	Bulgaria		Jordan
	Croatia		Kuwait
	Czechoslovakia		Lebanon
	Estonia		Libya
	Georgia		Morocco
	Hungary		Saudi Arabia
	Kosovo		South Sudan
	Latvia		Sudan
	Lithuania		Syria
	Macedonia		Turkey
	Moldova		Yemen
	Montenegro	Sub-Saharan Africa	Angola
	Poland		Benin
	Romania		Botswana

Region	Country	Region	Country
Sub-Saharan Africa	Burundi		The Gambia
	Cameroon		Togo
	Central African Republic		Uganda
	Chad		Zambia
	Congo-Brazzaville		Zimbabwe
	Democratic Republic of the Congo	West	Australia
	Cote d'Ivoire		Austria
	Djibouti		Belgium
	Eritrea		Canada
	Ethiopia		Cyprus
	Gabon		Finland
	Ghana		France
	Guinea		Greece
	Guinea-Bissau		Italy
	Kenya		New Zealand
	Liberia		Spain
	Madagascar		Switzerland
	Malawi		United Kingdom
	Mali		United States
	Mauritania		
	Mauritius		
	Mozambique		
	Namibia		
	Niger		
	Nigeria		
	Rwanda		
	Senegal		
	Sierra Leone		
	South Africa		
	Tanzania		

Appendix II: Regression Results

DV: Ethnic Civil War Onset	(1) Full Sample	(2) Middle East
Excluded	0.92***	0.62*
	(0.21)	(0.30)
Downgraded	0.78**	1.01
(5-Year Lag)	(0.24)	(0.81)
Relative Group Size	1.26***	1.46***
	(0.30)	(0.37)
Ln(War History)	1.91***	1.40**
	(0.19)	(0.47)
Ln(GDP p.c.)	-0.30**	-0.04
	(0.10)	(0.14)
Ln(Population)	0.07	0.47*
	(0.09)	(0.20)
Peace Years	-0.28***	-0.09
	(0.05)	(0.14)
Constant	-3.59*	-11.90***
	(1.74)	(3.49)
Cubic Splines	Yes	Yes
Observations	30876	3781
Log-Likelihood	-1129.90	-199.96
χ^2	483.71	1417.73

Country-clustered standard errors in parentheses.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$