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Undermining the transatlantic democracy agenda? The Arab Spring and Saudi Arabia's counteracting democracy strategy

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Saudi Arabian foreign policy is often declared to be countering the possible democratic transitions of the Arab Spring. As such, Saudi Arabia has been cast as a “counter-revolutionary” force in the Middle East and North Africa. This article explores the extent to which this has been the case in Egypt and Bahrain, and the extent to which Saudi foreign policy has challenged United States and European Union democracy promotion efforts in those countries. The article highlights how the transatlantic democracy promotion strategy is complicated by a conflict of interests problem, which leads them to promote democracy on an ad hoc and incremental basis. As a result, their efforts and larger strategic thinking are undermined by Saudi Arabia in Egypt. However, in Bahrain, transatlantic democracy promotion is itself muted by the strategic interest in containing Iran. As a result, Saudi Arabia can be seen as a regional countervailing power but this is implicitly in line with transatlantic policy. Tensions with Saudi foreign policy in Bahrain are over how best to manage the uprisings and maintain the status quo, rather than a conflict over political transition.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia; Bahrain; Egypt; United States; European Union; democracy promotion; democracy support

The United States (US) and the European Union (EU) have been slow and uncertain in their reactions to the political unrest in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Indeed, there has been a great deal of strategic confusion from the transatlantic partners, as events have outpaced policymakers' ability to produce cohesive strategies. Compounding this is the complexity of national interests that both the US and the EU have in the region. Whilst democracy promotion has been seen as a pragmatic national interest, which was most prominently expressed

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after 11 September 2001, both transatlantic partners have a “conflict of interests” problem.¹ In addition to promoting democracy, the US and EU, to greater and lesser extents, also seek to secure the free flow of energy into the global market, the movement of military and commercial traffic through the Suez Canal, to secure business contracts throughout the region, cooperation on immigration, military, counter-terrorism, and counter-proliferation policies, the security of regional allies such as Israel, and to contain hostile regimes such as Iran. This is a wide array of national security interests, of which democracy promotion is only one amongst many, and which often conflicts with these other more near-term interests and a desire for regional stability.² Democracy promotion policies ask governments to relinquish power across state institutions and to their citizenry, whilst these other security interests often entail the cooperation of regional governments. This is the paradox at the centre of US and EU relations with the MENA, which has been exacerbated by political unrest, rather than reduced.

With the conflict of interests problem being at the heart of many US and EU bilateral relations with countries across the MENA, it is unsurprising that the tone and texture of those relations differ. However, nowhere in the MENA region is this conflict of interest problem more pronounced and one-sided towards near-term interests than in transatlantic relations with the Gulf, and in particular with the regional hegemon Saudi Arabia. This dimension of transatlantic relations has been well-documented, and clearly shapes Western powers’ bilateral relationships with the Kingdom. Yet, in the context of the unfolding political unrest in the region, questions need to be asked regarding how the transatlantic–Saudi Arabian security nexus is affecting wider regional relationships as Saudi Arabia has become more assertive? On shallow first appearances this nexus would appear to be under strain. Official US and EU narratives profess a desire for democracy and human rights to take hold in the MENA, whilst Saudi Arabia has developed a reputation for “pushing back” against political transitions with the adoption of countervailing strategies throughout the region.³ This simplistic impression is, however, deeply problematic and fails to appreciate the complexities and nuances on both sides. What this article reveals is that, in spite of the tremendous political upheaval across the region, the US and EU have largely continued to prioritize immediate security interests over promoting democracy. As a result, there is in fact little direct or immediate tension between transatlantic policies and Saudi Arabian foreign policy. Tensions persist over strategy, and not the wider objective of regional stability and the maintenance of the status quo.

To elucidate this argument, this article outlines the nature of the US and EU’s relationships with Saudi Arabia to provide a wider context. It demonstrates that the US–Saudi relationship is broadly based on a wide variety of interests and security guarantees, and the EU–Saudi relationship is mainly based on trade without a strategic partnership. Second, this article outlines two case studies through the lens of US, EU, and Saudi policy in Egypt and Bahrain. The Egyptian and Bahraini cases are important because of the significant domestic involvement of Saudi Arabia and the transatlantic partners in the aftermath of their political unrest, and also

because they provide the clearest cases of a complex “conflict of interests” problem. With regard to the Egyptian case, it is shown that Saudi Arabia is undermining long-term efforts to promote democratic reform by challenging the model of democracy promotion at the heart of US and EU policies in the region. However, this does not involve the Kingdom directly confronting or clashing with the US and EU. Indeed, the US and EU themselves are all too ready to abandon this model when it proves expedient. Evidently, Saudi Arabian foreign policy in Egypt is less of a perspicuous reaction to a well-implemented transatlantic democracy agenda and more of an attempt to secure Saudi Arabia’s own long-term national security interests.

Similarly, in the case of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia has supported the status quo in an effort to protect the Kingdom’s national interests. However, rather than this being contrary to US and EU democracy promotion efforts in Bahrain, the tension between the US, EU, and Saudi Arabia is over how best to reform the al-Khalifa regime and maintain the status quo in an effort to contain Iranian influence in the Gulf. Bahrain’s continued political unrest has not altered strategic calculations or the convergence of interests between the transatlantic partners and Saudi Arabia. Accordingly, the empirical account presented below supports the hypotheses that first, illiberal regional powers react to US and EU democracy promotion efforts if this is a threat to the illiberal states’ geostrategic interests, or threatens the regime’s survival; but second, Western democracy promoters will only react to countervailing policies by illiberal regimes if and when they prioritize democracy and human rights goals over stability and security goals.

Transatlantic relations with Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is an ally and trading partner of both the US and EU. For the US, “Saudi Arabia’s unique role in the Arab and Islamic worlds, its possession of the world’s largest reserves of oil, and its strategic location make its friendship important to the United States”. The US openly declares that it shares “common concerns and consult[s] closely on [a] wide range of regional and global issues”. This is buttressed with the assertion that “Saudi Arabia is also a strong partner in regional security and counterterrorism efforts, providing military, diplomatic, and financial cooperation”. Indeed, for the US it is clear that this close working relationship is based on “safeguarding both countries’ national security interests”.⁴ Within this context, the US has long provided Saudi Arabia’s ruling House of Saud with a security guarantee against both external and internal threats.⁵ There was a subtle shift in this position following the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 and the onset of President George W. Bush’s Freedom Agenda. However, whilst over the last decade the US has been engaged in diplomatic efforts aimed at persuading Saudi Arabia to liberalize and focus on human rights issues by holding elections, releasing political prisoners, and allowing free expression and rights for women, this was never done at the expense of abandoning a long-term ally and undermining regional stability.⁶ Simply put, the US favours stability and security goals rather than prioritizes democracy and human rights. This is significant for

US democracy promotion in the region. The overall relationship with Saudi Arabia, emphasizing security and stability, shapes the US reaction to the Kingdom's countervailing policies that have emerged as a result of the Arab revolutions.

The nature of the US–Saudi alliance structures the EU's relationship with the Kingdom. With the House of Saud being supported by the US and buttressed by its vast resource revenues, the EU is unable to exert any significant influence over the Kingdom. Instead, the EU largely engages with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), whilst Saudi Arabia's foreign policy elite views the EU as little more than an inconsequential partner of the US. Nevertheless even the EU's position is tempered by considerations of stability and security goals. The EU maintains that Saudi Arabia's human rights record remains "dismal" and that there is a gap between "international obligations and . . . implementation". Nevertheless, the EU all too often stresses that "a large number of EU companies are investors in the Saudi economy, especially in the country's petroleum industry" and that Saudi Arabia is "an important market for the export of EU industrial goods in areas such as defence, transport, automotive, medical and chemical exports".⁷ Moreover, the EU, in line with the US, accepts Saudi Arabia's importance for the maintenance of traditionally conceived security issues. For the EU, Saudi Arabia is "an influential political, economic and religious actor in the Middle East and the Islamic world, the world's leading oil producer, and a founder and leading member of the Gulf Cooperation Council . . . and of the G-20 group", which makes it an "important partner for the EU".⁸ As such, the EU emphasizes the common challenges it faces with the Kingdom, "such as a rapidly changing economy, migration, energy security, international terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and environmental degradation".

Given the broad range of national security interests both the US and the EU maintain with Saudi Arabia, it is little wonder that transatlantic policies elevate stability in the Gulf as a top priority. The maintenance of the House of Saud and Saudi Arabia's strategic cooperation are seen as two sides of the same coin necessary for the pursuit of transatlantic interests. However, whilst Saudi national interests largely converge with the transatlantic powers, they do not always fully align. Within the wider complexities of the region, the geopolitical orientation and political nature of other Arab states affect Saudi Arabia more directly. As a result, Saudi Arabia has become more active in asserting its national interests in the region. This is particularly the case when the Kingdom's foreign policy elite views such action as necessary for their geostrategic interests and their survival. This creates a complex geostrategic landscape in which US and EU democracy promotion programmes need to operate, which at times, converge and diverge with the interests of their allies in the Gulf, which is highly evident in the case of Egypt and Bahrain.

Transatlantic democracy promotion and Saudi–Egyptian relations

US and EU values and professed objectives of promoting democracy converged with the removal of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in January 2011.

However, the transatlantic approach to Egypt initially diverged from that of its allies in the Gulf, creating considerable public disquiet from the Saudi foreign policy elite. For the Saudi regime, the US was willing to quickly abandon long-term partners and security guarantees if it proved expedient, whilst also allowing the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood. This was significant for Saudi Arabia, because Egypt's size and stature in the region could make it a potential rival, and if led by the Muslim Brotherhood could offer an alternative model for the relationship between Islam and the state. Consequently, the political direction of Egypt is perceived, by the Kingdom's foreign policy elite, as having direct consequences for Saudi Arabia's national interests and the continuation of the House of Saud. It is within this context that the Saudi regime was persistent in its declarations that events in Egypt were the product of "external" forces, and Saudi Arabia was eager to enlist US security guarantees on behalf of the Egyptian regime.⁹

Nevertheless, after considerable hesitation and the realization that events on the ground had led to a tipping point for Mubarak to leave, the US moved towards backing a democratic transition in Egypt. This was in direct conflict to personal pleas made by King Abdullah that the Obama administration protect the Mubarak regime and quash the uprising. Over the coming months, the Obama administration made clear assertions that the US would "promote reform across the region, and . . . support transitions to democracy".¹⁰ This was in addition to launching the Middle East Response Fund (MERF), creating a new US–Egyptian Enterprise Fund, in principle relieving Egypt of up to \$1 billion in debt, providing Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) loan guarantees of up to \$1 billion, supporting job creation through small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) development, and providing letters of credit. In addition to this economic assistance, the US also sought to boost trade with Egypt through the MENA Trade and Investment Partnership (MENA-TIP), stimulate greater private sector growth and activity, and expand exports through Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZs).¹¹ The US also mobilized the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) and other instruments for the distribution of democracy support funding, targeted at civil society organizations, political parties, and elections, along with providing technical and governance assistance to prepare for parliamentary and presidential elections.

Similar tools were adopted by the EU, seeking to exert leverage through its trade liberalization and development policies. In an effort to gain closer political relations, stabilize the Egyptian economy, and sooth regional unrest, the EU turned to the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). This emphasized "more for more" in an attempt to promote "deep democracy" along the theme of the "3Ms"; "Money, Markets and Mobility".¹² Accordingly, to boost economic assistance, development, and reforms, the EU institutionalized the SPRING programme to provide additional funding for the transitions, whilst refocusing the European Neighbourhood Partnership Instrument (ENPI), and expanding Europe Investment Bank (EIB) and Neighbourhood Investment Facility (NIF) activity. Additionally, the EU was active in providing macro-financial assistance (MFA), and promoting

SME activity through direct investment, microcredit and job creation and training. Having identified a serious gap in its available instruments to support democracy in the region, the EU also created the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), whilst expanding the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), it created a new Civil Society Facility (CSF), and emphasized capacity building, electoral assistance, and education programmes.¹³

The convergence between the US and the EU approach to post-Mubarak Egypt is evident in their emphasis on economic incentives and attempts to stabilize the Egyptian economy. This is significant at a policy level, as it has allowed for greater transatlantic cooperation, and, more importantly, the institutionalization of that cooperation in, for example, the Deauville Partnership. Moreover, whilst the US and EU have not yet reached the level of strategic coordination, they are operating with the same vision of how democratization processes come to fruition; namely through processes outlined in modernization theory instigated by economic liberalization.¹⁴ This provided part of the strategic background for engaging the Muslim Brotherhood with mainly economic incentives rather than, as Greenfield, Hawthorne, and Balfour illustrate, pushing too hard on democracy and human rights issues.¹⁵ Yet, relying on economic statecraft as a *modus operandi* for large parts of democracy support programming is not without its problems, and is undermined by Saudi Arabia.

For the US, its democratization strategy has long been tied to what those who institutionalized the Freedom Agenda called a “competitive liberalization strategy”.¹⁶ That is to say, the US has long sought to make assaults on protectionism in the region, motivated more by geopolitical and security considerations and less by economic concerns. The rationale was that countries in the MENA who were eager for greater access to US markets would vie for Washington’s attention and approval, and in return for liberalizing their economies MENA governments would avoid legitimization crises by diffusing popular dissatisfaction. The theory portrayed in Washington was that this closer access would allow slow and stable processes of modernization to take place and over decades would lead to the democratization of the region. Indeed, this was the framework under which the G.W. Bush administration sought to create a Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA), and it has also been a core component of MEPI and the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) initiative programming.¹⁷ Moreover, despite the political upheaval in Egypt, the Obama administration has continued utilizing this policy paradigm with its emphasis on economic assistance, trade, and investment. President Obama’s MENA-TIP is merely an extension of much of the thinking behind President G.W. Bush’s MEFTA.

The EU’s democratization strategy in Egypt, and across the Mediterranean, shares this emphasis on modernization through economic liberalization, and is a “competitive liberalization strategy” in all but name. Indeed, a core basis of the 1995 Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) was that the EU perceived some of its most pressing security concerns as emanating from the region. Consequently, it was concluded that the region needed to modernize. The strategic thinking

behind this was that economic liberalization would spill over into political liberalization, and as a result the EU emphasized the need for a Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area. This stressed the need for the region to remove trade barriers, strengthen the private sector, develop regulatory and legal frameworks, and develop macro-economic policies. This was designed to create a “zone of peace and stability”.¹⁸ The EU merely extended the same policy paradigm, after the political unrest in the MENA started, with its articulation of “more for more”, “deep democracy”, and “Money, Markets and Mobility”.¹⁹ Indeed, notions of “normative power Europe” have long relied on attracting and shaping partners through economic statecraft and access to the European market. As such, the greatest difference between the US and EU position is the latter’s significant emphasis on conditionality.

The transatlantic emphasis on democratization through economic modernization is deeply significant with regard to Saudi Arabia’s ability to counter democracy promotion efforts in Egypt. Whilst the US and EU both have a plethora of programmes on the ground supporting civil society and providing political party and election assistance, Saudi Arabia does not need to challenge these directly to undermine the wider transatlantic approach to external democracy promotion. The US and EU envisage democracy promotion in the MENA as a long-term objective that can be socially and economically engineered. Within this context there are programmes that emphasize the importance of elections, political liberalization, and the role of civil society, but at the core of the strategy is economic liberalization.²⁰ It is through the latter that external democracy promotion strategies seek to create an independent middle class, which in turn sets into motion wider political and economic modernization processes. With this form of modernization thesis underlying both the US and EU external democracy promotion strategies in the MENA, Saudi Arabia’s willingness to financially support the Egyptian state can be seen to undercut these efforts. That is to say, that to stymie transatlantic democracy promotion’s long-term efforts of promoting democracy, Saudi Arabia targets these modernization processes. In turn, this also undermines the US and EU’s leverage over Egypt’s political elites; effectively undermining transatlantic efforts to institutionalize their competitive liberalization strategies. Saudi Arabia’s ability to undercut the US and EU’s economic leverage, and plans to promote modernization, are therefore a direct challenge to the transatlantic external democracy promotion agenda. For example, how can the EU institutionalize conditionality and “more for more” if Egypt is more financially reliant on Saudi Arabia for immediate economic support? With the US and EU facing fiscal constraints, it is Saudi Arabia that has provided a less conditional financial “carrot” to Egyptian elites willing to act as a bulwark against the Muslim Brotherhood and align themselves with the Kingdom’s national interests. Undertaking such a task has been central to the development of Saudi Arabia’s bilateral relationship with Egypt following the 2011 revolution, and the Kingdom has found a willing partner in Egypt’s military elites following their 2013 counter-revolution against the Muslim Brotherhood.

Following the fall of President Mubarak, multiple high-level meetings were held between Saudi and Egyptian officials, as the Egyptians sought to provide reassurances and maintain bilateral relations. Indeed, Prime Minister Essam Sharaf, who was asked to form a government by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in March 2011, asserted that “we are tied with the G.C.C. countries by historic relations and interference in their affairs is a red line”.²¹ Moreover, Cairo was eager to reassure Riyadh that its apparent rapprochement with Iran, most visibly evident in two Iranian war ships sailing through the Suez Canal in February 2011, would not interfere with Egyptian–GCC relations. Bilateral relations between Egypt and Saudi Arabia remained stable, with joint military exercises taking place along with a \$500 million grant to support the Egyptian budget, the commitment of a \$3.75 billion aid package, 48,000 tons of liquefied petroleum gas, and discussions of a further \$1.5 billion aid package commitment through the Saudi Development Fund.²²

With the election of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Mohammad Morsi to presidential office on 24 June 2012, the certainty of having the SCAF rule Egypt was removed. Saudi Arabia received initial reassurances when Morsi’s first foreign visit was undertaken to Riyadh in July.²³ This was, however, short-lived. President Morsi visited Tehran the following month, being the first Egyptian leader to do so since relations were severed in 1980. This sent a deeply troubling signal to Riyadh. Not only was President Morsi refusing to accept the long-held Iranian containment policy put in place by the US, the EU, and the GCC, but in doing so he was demonstrating Egypt’s potential to rival Saudi Arabia’s hegemony across the Arab world. Moreover, Egypt’s ability to upset the region’s geopolitical rivalries aside, the democratic election of the Muslim Brotherhood itself also posed a problem to some in Riyadh. It created a democratically elected Islamist rival to claims of Saudi Arabia being the protector of Islam, and offered a potentially dangerous exemplar in the region that could well have undermined the kingdom’s legitimacy in the long term.²⁴ As a result, following the military coup on 3 July 2013, Saudi Arabia has been deeply supportive of the Egyptian military, which has led to openly strained relations with Turkey, Qatar, the US, and the EU.

The form of Saudi support for the military coup has been evident in the financial backing Riyadh has provided. Just days after the coup, Saudi Arabia announced a \$5 billion aid package, along with an additional \$3 billion from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and \$4 billion from Kuwait.²⁵ Yet, in addition to this, the Saudi regime has been extremely vocal in its support of the Egyptian military’s crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and its efforts to fight “terrorism, falsehood and sedition”. In a rare display of open diplomatic gesturing with the US and EU, King Abdullah also warned “against those who try to tamper with Egypt’s domestic affairs”.²⁶

With close ties between the Saudi regime and Egypt’s Field Marshal Abd-al-Fattah al-Sisi, it is clear that Saudi Arabia is actively backing autocratic rule in Egypt through financial and diplomatic support designed to buy influence in the country. Moreover, the interests of the Egyptian military and Saudi Arabia align

to the extent that they seek to maintain the status quo and economic stability. This provides Saudi Arabia with a partner and purchase for internal interference in Egyptian affairs. Saudi interests rest on countering the Muslim Brotherhood across the region and, therefore, in supporting the counter-revolution. Thus, although the Egyptian military are ultimately responsible for countering democratic reforms in Egypt, the Saudi foreign policy elite has been backing their efforts, and undermining US and EU democratization and liberalization strategies. This is not to argue that the US and EU have a consistent track record of promoting democracy in Egypt, but rather to suggest that the transatlantic partners have a larger strategic vision of how to incrementally transform the Egyptian state, which is being challenged by Saudi foreign policy. Moreover, whilst the transatlantic partners maintain the same incremental vision for other states in the region this is itself weakened depending on the urgency and priority of other strategic interests. Indeed, this is highly visible in Bahrain where democracy promotion efforts emphasize reform rather than transition, and transatlantic interests align with those of the Saudi foreign policy elite.

Transatlantic democracy promotion and Saudi–Bahraini relations

With protesters occupying Manama's Pearl Roundabout in February 2011, it was clear that the Arab Spring had reached Bahrain, threatening the first Gulf monarchy. As the protesters attempted to create a cross-sectarian politics and appeal to a national consciousness, calls were limited to political reform. However, as demands began to grow, calls for the Sunni House of al-Khalifa to put an end to the discrimination against the 60% Shia Muslim population emerged. These calls were seized upon by hardline members of the ruling al-Khalifa regime and interpreted through a sectarian discourse. As a result, they were branded by the regime as attempts by Iran to gain influence in the country and expand Iranian influence in the region. This discursive move was easily done, drawing on notions that the Shia population represents a "fifth column" under Iranian authority. Under this discursive umbrella, Bahraini security forces surrounded the Pearl Roundabout protesters on 17 February, and used tear gas and baton rounds to remove the protesters. Further protests on 18 February, were met with the same coercive response. However, Bahraini security forces later pulled back, and allowed protesters to reoccupy the Pearl Roundabout and hold the largest demonstrations in Bahraini history on 22 February and 25 February. In turn, the ruling al-Khalifa regime announced plans for a national dialogue, whilst releasing 308 Bahraini prisoners, and removing two al-Khalifa family members from cabinet posts.²⁷

With key parties unwilling to accept the al-Khalifa offer of a national dialogue, the spread of the Sunni-Shia clashes, and Manama's financial district threatened by a protester blockade, Bahrain turned to the GCC for support. Having stymied the "Day of Rage" in its own country, and feeling more domestically stable, Saudi Arabia led the GCC's efforts to secure key sites within Bahrain. The manner in

which Saudi Arabia actively supported the status quo in Bahrain and helped maintain the power of the monarchy significantly contributed to the wider conception that Saudi Arabia is “blocking democracy” and engaged in a “counter-revolution” across the region. Indeed, on 14 March, Saudi Arabia sent 1200 armed forces personnel across the King Fahd Causeway that joins the two countries.²⁸ Bahraini officials argued that the Peninsular Shield force was there to protect government facilities, rather than to intrude in the internal affairs of the country itself.²⁹ Nevertheless, the presence of the Peninsular Shield force coincided with Bahraini security forces once again clearing the demonstrators from the Pearl Roundabout and demolishing the Pearl Monument. This put an end to protests in downtown Manama, and led to more limited and sporadic protests throughout the country. Saudi Arabia had significantly contributed to preventing the overthrow of the al-Khalifa regime, in line with its policy of not allowing a majority Shia population to come to power. For the Saudi foreign policy elite, this urgent action was needed to prevent the political aspirations of its own Shia population in the Eastern Province, but also those of Shia minorities across the GCC, coming to fruition. Moreover, supporting the al-Khalifa regime was a fundamental part of the long-held Saudi policy of containing Iranian influence.

Saudi Arabia's heightened commitment to the security of the al-Khalifa regime, following the quelling of the initial protests, came in the form of a bilateral donation of at least \$500 million to boost the Bahraini economy. Further still, Saudi Arabia sought to renew closer political and security unity within the GCC. On 14 May 2011, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain announced a plan for greater political and military union in the Riyadh Declaration. This unequivocally signalled that Bahrain maintained Saudi backing, and was intended as a deterrent against further protests. Whilst other members of the GCC, in particular Oman, have opposed political unity plans, the GCC agreed a collective security agreement in December 2012. In Bahrain, these efforts are directly intended to prevent a majoritarian Shiite government from emerging with the downfall of the House of al-Khalifa. Saudi intervention in Bahrain can therefore be seen as a countervailing strategy adopted by an illiberal regime seeking to prevent political transition. The rationale for this is two-fold; first, for geostrategic reasons designed to prevent Iran gaining influence throughout the region, and second, to stop unrest spreading further in its own Eastern Province, which could threaten the Saudi regime's survival. This is particularly fecund as both conditions are outlined as “triggers” in Risse and Babayan's³⁰ hypothesis explaining why illiberal regional powers push back against US and EU democracy promotion efforts. The US and EU have had to adapt to this push back due to all three of conditions Risse and Babayan outline as determinants of where democracy promotion and human rights fit into the foreign policy agenda. First, there is a transatlantic preference in the Gulf for stability and security over democracy and human rights, second, Saudi Arabia is deemed too strategically important in its regional hegemonic role, and third, internal considerations of democracy promotion within the US and EU undermine the agenda.

At a superficial level, Saudi Arabia's actions in Bahrain are in direct competition with the US and EU's espoused democratization policies in the country. The US has long-established democracy support programmes in the country through MEPI, which has conducted media training, promoted legal and judicial reform, and sought to bolster non-governmental organizations and civil society activity.³¹ The US and Bahrain also signed a Free Trade Agreement in 2004 under the auspices of MEFTA. This came into effect in January 2006 and was part of the competitive liberalization rationale held by the G.W. Bush administration. Moreover, under the Obama administration, the US was eager during the protests to urge Bahraini security forces to pull back from targeting protesters with coercive force, to compromise and maintain a dialogue, and it also halted some arms sales that could potentially have been used against the protesters.³² Yet, the Obama administration never called for a political transition or the start of a democratization process. This is because the maintenance of the regime is tied to the US's strategic interests in the region, which are also aligned with those of Saudi Arabia.

The US is Bahrain's primary Western partner and maintains an extensive security relationship, with the small Gulf state being home to the US naval headquarters in the region for over 60 years. The US and Bahrain, since 1991, have also been committed to a Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA), and Bahrain is designated as a "major non-NATO ally". In spite of Bahrain's considerable unrest, and its willingness to use coercive force against protesters, the US has maintained these agreements and continued its partnership. Indeed, the military side of this relationship has been expanded since the uprisings with expanding US military facilities in Bahrain.³³ For the US the emergence of a Shiite-led government in Bahrain could provide Iran with greater influence in the Gulf and undermine the current US–Bahraini security relationship, and therefore lead to the agreement over US use of military facilities being withdrawn. As such, there is a conflict of interests problem at the heart of the US–Bahraini relationship, where US democracy promotion efforts are in tension with other US security interests.

As a result of the conflict of interests problem, US's calls for democracy in the country are mitigated to pronouncements for reform and dialogue. These are intended to promote slow incremental change under the existing regime, and not revolutionary action that could undermine other US interests. This was not only the dominant approach adopted under the Freedom Agenda and its competitive liberalization strategy in the 2000s, but has also been evident in the Obama administration's approach to the Arab awakening in Bahrain. Thus, whilst the Obama administration was critical of the Saudi-led GCC intervention, it emphasized the need for a political reform process that maintained the status quo. As Secretary of State Clinton argued, at length, on 19 March 2011:

The United States has an abiding commitment to Gulf security and a top priority is working together with our partners on our shared concerns about Iranian behaviour

in the region. We share the view that Iran's activities in the Gulf, including its efforts to advance its agenda in neighbouring countries, undermines peace and stability . . . Bahrain obviously has the sovereign right to invite G.C.C. forces into its territory under its defence and security agreements . . . violence is not and cannot be the answer. A political process is.³⁴

Within this context it is clear that the stated US "top priority" of containing Iranian influence is in line with Saudi national interests, and calls for democracy had been relegated down the political agenda. The tension between the US and Saudi Arabian foreign policy, therefore, is over how the status quo in Bahrain is maintained whilst observing human rights norms, and not if the regime should be maintained. Indeed, even as the Bahraini state and media has pushed back against MEPI activity, the US response has been to emphasize how MEPI provides "direct support to the work of local partners, helping them to network and partner with like-minded colleagues from the United States and the region", rather than "alter the internal politics" of the state itself. In turn the US stresses the importance of implementing the recommendations of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) and the need for "trade liberalization and economic diversification in the country". As the US argues, it is through these activities that it is "committed to supporting the Government of Bahrain's efforts to achieve its economic, development, and reform goals".³⁵ This is envisioned as a long and distant "democracy promotion" strategy in "partnership" with the al-Khalifa regime, and not one that seeks the empowerment of Bahrain's Shiite majority population.

EU–Bahraini relations share the same conflict of interests problem as their transatlantic partner. The EU is a tertiary actor in Bahrain compared to the US and Saudi Arabia, and its normative agenda is stymied by many of the same factors that limit its influence throughout its relations with other GCC states. However, the EU's limited response to the uprising in Bahrain, stopping at declaratory policy, should also be understood by virtue of Britain, France, and Germany objecting to the potential of greater Iranian influence in the region. As Tobias Schumacher argues,

the E.U. stressed the need for reforms and demanded that the Bahraini regime engage in comprehensive and inclusive dialogue. Yet, it stopped short of defining more precisely the character of reforms and the challenges it refers to and calling for a transition and therefore the resignation of King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa and his ruling family . . . numerous member states' governments . . . fear that such a development would help those Iranian factions that conceive of Bahrain as Iran's fourteenth province.³⁶

As a result of the conflict of interests problem, the EU Foreign Affairs Council was unable to achieve more than a vague declaratory policy on the situation in Bahrain, and did not seize opportunities to condemn the Bahraini regime when they presented themselves. Indeed, British Prime Minister David Cameron expounded the differentiation being made between the regional uprisings when he declared

that “Bahrain is not Syria”.³⁷ This is deeply problematic given that within the EU, Britain enjoys the closest relationship with Bahrain because of its colonial legacy and arms sale relationship. Moreover, Robert Cooper, a special adviser to the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, simply declared that “accidents happen” when briefing Members of European Parliament about the use of force against Bahraini protesters.³⁸ The timidity of the EU’s response to the uprising in Bahrain undermines its normative agenda. This has led some analysts to highlight the relationship between European arms sales and the EU’s willingness to confront regimes in the Gulf.³⁹

Evidently, Saudi Arabia has provided instrumental support to the Bahraini regime and is a countervailing power against domestic pressures for political transition. However, the notion that this has conflicted with the US and the EU’s democracy promotion policy is deeply problematic. At best the conflict is over how best to manage the uprisings in Bahrain and maintain the existing regime. At worst, “the US and the EU have implicitly condoned the sectarianism used by the Bahraini and Saudi governments to subdue protesters” and the transatlantic partners have been “complicit in creating a sectarian Gulf, which is in line with its strategic goal of keeping the Gulf monarchies in power to help counter Iran”.⁴⁰ Although in the case of Bahrain it is clear that Saudi Arabia has sought to block the emergence of democracy, there is little by way of tension with the transatlantic approach to the small Gulf island and their democracy promotion efforts.

Conclusion

The assertion that illiberal regional powers respond to Western efforts at democracy promotion in third countries if they perceive challenges to their geostrategic interests and/or the survival of their regime is clearly the case with regard to Saudi Arabian foreign policy in Egypt and Bahrain. Moreover, the observation that Western democracy promoters only react to countervailing policies when they prioritize democracy and human rights over security in the target country is not challenged with regard to US and EU foreign relations with Egypt or Bahrain. Evidently, the empirical evidence presented above supports Risse and Babayan’s hypothesis, and Western and Saudi policies appear to correspond to the main propositions about motives and policies they set out. The US and EU have varied interests across the MENA region, and these influence the extent to which they pursue their democratization agendas. Within the Gulf region other strategic interests are elevated above those of promoting democracy and Saudi Arabia can therefore act as a countervailing power. Yet, even in Egypt, where the US and EU had a window of opportunity for promoting democracy, this was not seized and the counter-revolution was straightforwardly institutionalized with the implicit approval of the US and EU. Instead, the transatlantic partners relied on a policy paradigm that emphasized modernization and political liberalization as a cautious long-term approach. Without expanding their foreign policy tools beyond this policy paradigm, the transatlantic approach has been undermined

by Saudi Arabia's ability to buy influence and undermine Western leverage for political reforms. The evidence suggests that the incremental and cautious transatlantic approach has not changed much since it was developed in the 2000s and has certainly not adapted to "pushback" from countervailing powers. This is in and of itself remarkable given the profound nature of change sweeping across the region. Whilst it is clear that the geopolitical and geostrategic landscape of the region is changing, the transatlantic approach is not. It is little wonder therefore that Saudi Arabia has been able to adapt and pursue its interests, at the expense of any serious transatlantic democracy promotion agendas.

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Notes

1. This term was adopted from Wittes, *Freedom's Unsteady March*.
2. See Hassan, *Constructing America's Freedom Agenda for the Middle East*.
3. For an analysis of "push back" as a global phenomenon, see Carothers and Brechenmacher, "Closing Spaces."
4. Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, "U.S. Relations With Saudi Arabia."
5. Weisman, "Reagan Says U.S. Would Bar a Takeover in Saudi Arabia That Imperiled the Flow of Oil"; also see Hassan, *Constructing America's Freedom Agenda for the Middle East*.
6. Weisman, "Rice Urges Egyptians and Saudis to Democratize."
7. European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs, *On Saudi Arabia, Its Relations with the EU and Its Role in the Middle East and North Africa*.
8. Ibid.
9. Saudi News Agency, "Saudi King Telephones Egyptian President, Slams 'Malicious Sedition'."
10. Obama, "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa."
11. See Danya and Balfour, *Arab Awakening*.
12. Archick and Mix, *The United States and Europe*.
13. Greenfield and Balfour, *Arab Awakening*.
14. See Hassan, *Constructing America's Freedom Agenda for the Middle East*; Bridoux and Kurki, *Democracy Promotion*, 76–85.
15. Danya, Hawthorne, and Balfour, *US and EU*, 2.
16. Hassan, *Constructing America's Freedom Agenda for the Middle East*.
17. Ibid.
18. Youngs, *The European Union and Democracy Promotion*, 47–93.
19. The "3M's" were "money," to provide resources for the transitions, support civil society, and meet economic needs; "markets," to give advantages to the region for trade; and "mobility," to allow people to move around, especially business people to enable all of them to be more effective.
20. Hassan, "Bush's Freedom Agenda."
21. Saudi News Agency, "Egyptian Premier Praises Saudi Ties, Says Gulf Security 'Red Line'."
22. Saudi News Agency, "Saudi Arabia Details Support to Egypt after Complaint."
23. Mossavat, "Hosting Morsi's First Foreign Trip Is a Coup for Saudi Arabia."
24. Hearst, "Why Saudi Arabia Is Taking a Risk by Backing the Egyptian Coup."

25. Peel and Hall, "Saudi Arabia and UAE Prop up Egypt Regime with Offer of \$8bn"; and Nordland, "Saudi Arabia Promises to Aid Egypt's Regime."
26. Saudi News Agency, "Saudi King Declares Support for Egypt against 'Terrorism.'"
27. Katzman, *Bahrain*.
28. Ibid.
29. Lessware, "State of Emergency Declared in Bahrain."
30. Risse and Babayan, "Democracy Promotion and the Challenges of Illiberal Regional Powers."
31. US Department of State, "MEPI in Bahrain."
32. Katzman, *Bahrain*.
33. Ibid.
34. Clinton, "Press Availability at Chief of Mission Residence."
35. US Embassy Bahrain, "Statement from the U.S. Embassy Concerning MEPI."
36. Schumacher, "Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries and Yemen."
37. Wearing, "Bahrain May Not Be Syria, but That's No Reason for Activists to Turn a Blind Eye."
38. BBC, "EU Envoy Defends Bahrain Police amid Unrest."
39. Matthesen, "EU Foreign Policy towards Bahrain in the Aftermath of the Uprising."
40. Ibid.

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