

One of the major themes running through this week's readings on authoritarianism is the battle between the two explanatory forces of interests and ideas. All of the readings draw at least in part on ideas as explanations for elite and citizen behavior. Wedeen (1999, 2013) and Jones (2015) make that choice explicitly: both start from an observation that purely interest-based explanations fall short. Bush et al. (2016) implicitly side with the idea camp by proposing that subliminal cues could influence behavior. Finally, Bellin (2004, 2012) spends time on both types of variables on her first article, but in her second (post-Arab Spring) article, she emphasizes psychological variables.

In this essay, I will start by clarifying what I mean by interest-based versus ideas-based approaches, using examples from the readings. Next, I will show how these two perspectives should lead to different predictions about authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. Finally, I will talk about how the readings illustrate obvious rifts within ideas-focused accounts.

Interest-based and ideas-based explanations

First, we need a clear definition of interest-based (or as Jones calls them, rationalist; or as Wedeen calls them, materialist) approaches. As their name suggests, these approaches assume that the most important drivers of human behavior are interests. Those are usually understood as straightforward material needs: survival, physical well-being of one's self and family, and power insofar as it helps one protect those things. Of course, interests influence us through our cognitions. We have to know what

our goals are and what actions to take to pursue them. But the assumption is that this is unproblematic: people logically combine all the information they have to decide on the best course of action. Emotions, identities and beliefs (if not strictly based on information) are all mere symptoms with no causal clout. Ideas-based approaches is the very broad term I use to describe all perspectives on individual behavior that drop one of these assumptions.

There are many examples in the readings of clashes between these two perspectives as explanations of the same phenomena. Explaining liberal reforms in the UAE, Jones (2015) contrasts her own story (based on autocrats' nostalgia for life in the West) with rationalist accounts (based on autocrats' interest in staying in power). Interpreting the coercive capacity of regimes, Bellin (2004) distinguishes between the military's capability to repress, and their willingness to do so. Bellin (2012) seems to be torn about what caused mass mobilization during the Arab Spring in Egypt and Tunisia. She writes that in Egypt in 2011, civilians demonstrated because the military had decided not to fire on protesters. As a result, people felt that the risks of protesting were low. At the same time, when police in Tunisia did decide to shoot at civilians, this triggered outrage and also resulted in further protests. Wedeen similarly argues that in Syria in 2012, resistance grew rather than shrunk in the face of repression.

Although interests and ideas are a convenient way of categorizing theories, the lines are sometimes blurred. Bellin's (2004) argument about patrimonialism mostly revolves around interests--specifically the life and career prospects of military personnel with and without a revolution. But folded into this argument is the identity of the military (primarily the identification of soldiers with the regime versus the people) and how it sees its role. Another instance of blurring is Wedeen's (1999) account of spectacles. We can easily cast her idealist description in a more material light: by showing off the number of citizens who do not openly resist, Hafiz al-Asad was able to signal that no-one had an interest in trying to revolt. And while Wedeen (2013) uses the typical materialist argument of rentier

state citizens trading off rights for a “good life”, she makes it about whether citizens see themselves as capable of revolting.

Explaining regime transitions in the Middle East

In the previous section, I distinguished between interest-based and ideas-based approaches to behavior under authoritarianism. Now, I will turn to the predictions from each of these perspectives as to the likelihood of regime transitions in the Middle East. Specifically, given that almost no authors from either camp predicted the Arab Spring, can interest-based or idea-based approaches give satisfactory post-hoc explanations?

Most simple interest-based theories would predict neither revolutions nor political reforms in Middle East. Materialist accounts of revolutions, from Marx to Acemoglu and Robinson (2001), have usually assumed that citizens rise up because they are convinced that democracy will ensue as long as they bear the cost of revolution. Citizens in these theories also believe that in a democracy, they will be objectively better off. Such theories have mostly assumed away collective action problems (surprisingly, because those problems fit rather well with interest-based accounts). However, most Middle Eastern autocrats have militaries capable of repressing unrest, and many of them already redistribute some of the countries' resource rents to the population. Given all this and the poor record of past revolutionary outcomes in the region, citizens must know that life may not improve after an attempt at regime transition. Moreover, these societies face threats both from within and from outside, and there is no guarantee that the next regime would be better at protecting citizens. Finally, if autocrats know that revolutionary tendencies in their country are weak, they have no incentive to allow reform.

Still, interest-based approaches are not totally powerless in explaining regime change in the Middle East. Autocrats' coercive capacities could certainly explain why the Arab Spring did not happen sooner. And these theories do give us a handle on why particular countries saw attempts at regime transition. The countries where Arab Spring has arguably had the most impact—Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria—are also among the poorest in the region. It would be interesting to investigate whether they also have, say, high wealth inequality, or low median incomes given their resource endowment.

Evaluating ideas-based accounts of the Arab Spring is more complicated. On the one hand, these outlooks are better suited to explain sudden change, since beliefs and emotions typically shift faster than material circumstances. The rapid succession of uprisings in different countries also suggests a diffusion effect that is more than just informational (i.e. civilians and service members learning about the likelihood of successful mobilization). Finally, Bellin's (2012) compelling explanation of events in Tunisia and Egypt is mostly idealist. On the other hand, only some ideational variables form plausible explanations of why the Arab Spring happened when and where it happened. Other factors had pointed to the conclusion that revolution in the Middle East was unlikely across the board. Bellin (2004) cites a few of these: ethnic loyalty bonds between rulers and people in key military positions, the association of liberalization with colonialism, and the availability of islamism as an attractive non-democratic ideology. In other words, it is difficult to say whether idea-based explanations as a whole are suitable or not for explaining the events of the Arab Spring.

A second problem with ideas-based accounts is that they are generally less systematic. Unlike results from interest-based accounts, they are difficult to translate into laws of behavior. We need to keep in mind that scholars focused on ideas also did not predict regime change in the Middle East. Bellin (2012) herself admits that variables do not travel well even between the two cases that she highlights. In sum, while interest-based accounts cannot easily explain the incidence of uprisings in the Middle

East, idea-based accounts are too varied to evaluate, and often too narrow to predict anything at all.

The many ideas about ideas

The discussion in the previous section already suggests that a bit more nuance is needed in lumping together ideas-based perspectives. In this final section, I would like to add that nuance. Using this week's readings as examples, I will discuss both the substantive and (especially) the methodological differences between different authors with a non-material focus.

In a few places in the readings, authors actually compare and contrast different ideas-based approaches. For instance, Jones (2015) notes that her ethnographic findings are incompatible with several ideational explanations for liberal reform. She argues that emotions and (selective) memories explain the behavior of UAE ruling elites better than “world culture”, enlightenment ideals, brand competition between Gulf states, or Western norm entrepreneurs. Wedeen (1999) rejects the theory that personality cults create legitimacy, because Hafid al-Asad's cult was maintained despite being a failure in that sense. Finally, the work by Bush et al. (2016) highlights the difference between thoughts that are processed consciously versus subconsciously.

But even more than they showcase a range of psychological mechanisms, the articles and chapter illustrate that methods and epistemologies within ideational approaches are not one. Since the differences between experimental work and qualitative observational work are already well-understood, I will focus here on Wedeen, Jones and Bellin.

In terms of evidence, the main divide is between speech/text analysis (Wedeen, Jones), cross-country comparisons, and analysis of the order of events (Bellin 2012). Wedeen and Jones both refer to their

work as “ethnography”, and both use language as their main source. In the case of Jones, it is open-ended interviews with ruling elites. Wedeen uses a wider variety of sources, including magazine articles, TV shows, films, youtube clips, interviews with cultural elites, and protest slogans. Bellin, on the other hand, focuses on what happened when, trying to induce people's motivations and reasoning from their actions. Note that these sources of evidence also entail units of analysis. Jones and Wedeen gain insight in the thoughts of opinion leaders within and outside authoritarian regimes. Meanwhile, by analyzing mass demonstrations, Bellin gets a sense of what rank-and-file protesters might have been thinking.

Second, there is an obvious split between Wedeen and the other two authors in terms of what they believe we can learn from this evidence. While Jones and Bellin use the language of causes and effects, seeking to explain some unexpected phenomenon, the goals of Wedeen are less clear. She sets out, like Bellin, to understand mass mobilization. However, while she provides a context for the events in Syria, she rarely draws a connection between the cultural outputs that she studies and what appears to be the dependent variable—degrees of mobilization against the Asad regime at different points in time. While the thematic connection with the other readings is obvious, Wedeen's approach makes it difficult to understand how exactly her conclusions tie in. In that sense, perhaps the key distinction in these reading is between Wedeen and the other works, material and ideational alike.

References

Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. "A theory of political transitions." *American Economic Review* (2001): 938-963.

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