

The Coup Taboo
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Abstract

Is there a normative proscription against military coups? Using literatures on the legitimacy of military rule and anti-coup norms, this essay articulates the normative boundaries of stigmatized coups politics. The study assesses the operation of a *coup taboo* with case comparisons of Egypt (2013) and Turkey (2016)—as well as a brief historical survey of Iraq (1936-41), Syria (1949-70), and Turkey (1960-2011). Research is based on Arabic language memoirs and newspapers; reports from the British Foreign Office; photographic field observations (Egypt, 2013); and secondary sources in English and Arabic. First, the taboo regulates social behavior in situations where public discourse focuses on the legitimacy of coups. Second, anti-coup norms define membership to a community of legitimate states. Third, there are two unintended consequences of the coup taboo: (a) regimes that survive coup attempts use anti-coup norms to justify repression (Turkey, 2016); and (b) coup-makers have developed parallel norms to circumvent the taboo, like calling their behavior revolutionary (Egypt, 2013).

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Soldiers and civilians in the Middle East have been willing to lock arms and dirty their hands to advance their interests via military takeover, since at least the Ottoman Young Turks. They have also worried that ordering tanks to occupy the capital and troops to storm the presidential palace may be interpreted domestically and internationally as a coup. This tradition of Middle East politics is part of a broader logic of stigmatized coup politics—a *coup taboo* that proscribes armed public agents from intervening in politics. We do not fully grasp this normative prohibition against military intervention into politics and as a result lack a common language to identify its origins, operation, or maintenance. After civilian-advocated and popularly backed coups, observers debate whether or not the event was a coup, revolution, “covevolution,”¹ eventually agreeing that it was a popularly backed coup. This essay shows that various understandings of a single coup event are the result of the global prohibition against military takeovers, which requires perpetrators to legitimate their coups to bring their actions into normative alignment. The political stigma surrounding military intervention leads the innocent to condemn coups and shames the guilty into changing the definition of their behavior.

Conspirators’s ability to get away with coup legitimation stems from a misconception of what constitutes “normal” civil-military relations. The sight of civilians advocating for armed intervention sharply deviates from collective expectations that civilians should oppose coups d’état. Western observers in particular struggle to understand a crowd cheering for the functional cessation of democracy—a not uncommon practice in coup politics.² The coup taboo synthesizes research in civil-military relations (CMR) on legitimacy, anti-coup norms, and public support for coups in

¹ Shafick, Gazal, Nader, Nabil, Adel, and Soliman 2013, 15.

² Singh 2013; Grewal 2018; Kinney 2018.

order to re-conceptualize our expectations about coups. This offers researchers a more precise language with which to understand the domestic and international normative environment in which the politics of coups d'état operate.

This essay assesses the operation of the coup taboo with case comparisons of Egypt (2013) and Turkey (2016)—as well as a brief historical survey of Iraq (1936-41), Syria (1949-70), and Turkey (1960-2011). Research is based on Arabic language memoirs and newspapers; reports from the British Foreign Office; photographic field observations (Egypt, 2013); and secondary sources in English and Arabic. There are three principal findings from this case material. First, the taboo *regulates* social behavior in *coup environments*, i.e., when public discourse becomes focused on the legitimacy of armed intervention. Second, anti-coup norms are *constitutively* linked to global discourse on democracy—as conspirators struggle to remain normative insiders. Finally, the taboo has two *permissive*, or unintended, effects: (1) regimes that survive coup attempts use anti-coup norms to justify repression (Turkey, 2016); and (2) coup perpetrators have developed parallel norms to circumvent the taboo, such as branding their actions as revolutionary (Egypt, 2013).

The taboo increases the costs of coup conspiracy by ensuring that perpetrators will endure condemnation, unless they make an effort to legitimate their actions in the eyes of their publics and the international community. Thus the taboo teaches observers to be confident in their assessment of coup events, even when coup-makers attempt to legitimate their actions with references to the popular will. Efforts to convince the international community that a coup is not a coup are meant to bring a transgressive behavior into normative alignment. Understanding the coup taboo therefore offers an

opportunity to security sector reformers and democracy activists to instill norms of democratic civilian control. The taboo is an analytical tool for “coup detection,” a vocabulary to quickly spot and call out transgressions before they are legitimated. This can raise the costs for world leaders to re-classify coups, as when the United States adopted General Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi’s legitimizing language in 2013.

The essay also contributes to theoretical debates in International Relations (IR) and civil-military relations (CMR). State actors are not merely concerned with security and material distributions of power. Such conceptions of international politics cannot explain why the African Union (AU) suspended Egypt after its July 2013 coup or why dozens of heads of state issued anti-coup and pro-democracy statements in response to Turkey’s abortive coup in July 2016. The taboo does not challenge institutional Liberals, but points out that Liberal theory linking peace and democracy to aid and international markets relies on assumptions about the power of norms (e.g., revoking aid for norms violations). While the CMR literature generally recognizes the power of norms and legitimacy, it also privileges material power in studies of coups and military extrication. This taboo shows how material power (e.g., weapons) cannot make sense of successful coup-makers’s serious efforts to legitimate their behavior. This clarifies and strengthens the theoretical mechanisms of existing research. The study also identifies expectations about responses to particular coup environments (e.g., successful/unsuccessful).

The Coup Taboo

“Power grows out of the barrel of the gun,” said Mao Zedong. “Our principle is that *the party commands the gun and the gun shall never be allowed to command the*

party.”³ Those tasked with managing the relationship between soldiers and civilians are familiar with the power of the normative boundary that reserves political decision-making for civilians. Since at least the transfer of society’s weaponry from private to public hands—i.e., the development of modern states and their militaries⁴—unarmed actors have been propagating the powerful idea that armed and unarmed agents should be confined to pre-designated spheres. They have created a *coup taboo*, or a normative proscription against the violent and potentially deadly effects of military takeovers. This anti-coup norm is the weapon civilians wield in their dealings with soldiers. Although students of civil-military relations have not studied the origins of this norm or how unarmed public agents use to reinforce it, they have provided a vast array of literature on the “legitimacy” of coups and military rule.

Theorists generally agree that soldiers must legitimize takeovers. Juntas cannot rely solely on force.⁵ Samuel Finer argued that “the threat of physical compulsion is not an efficient, i.e. an economical, way of securing obedience.”⁶ “A military junta legitimizes itself,” Finer wrote, “in order to slam the door of morality in its challengers’ face.”⁷ Echoing this claim, Eleizer Be’eri asserted that Middle East coup perpetrators prevented follow-up coups by giving “their regimes the appearance of civilian rule.”⁸

Eric Nordlinger observed that, on the opportunity side, officers with motive to intervene

³ As quoted in Nordlinger 1977, 13.

⁴ Weber 1946; Winters 2009.

⁵ E.g., Finer 1962; Roberts 1975, 19-36; Luttwak 1979; Wiking 1983; Londregan and Poole 1990; Seligson and Carrion 2002; Belkin and Schofer 2003; Powell 2012; Svolik 2012; Goldberg 2013; Casper and Tyson 2014; Singh 2014, 45; Grewal and Kureshi 2018; Kinney 2018.

⁶ Finer 1962, 20.

⁷ Finer 1962, 18; and see Belkin and Schofer 2003 for a discussion of this exact point.

⁸ Be’eri 1982, 75.

will be hesitant to stage coups unless their target regimes are facing legitimacy crises. Such situations make it easier for coup perpetrators to legitimize their rule.⁹ “The most opportune moment for an intervention,” wrote Staffan Wiking, “is when the level of confidence in the civilian institutions is low at the same time as the armed forces are enjoying a degree of popularity.”¹⁰ Legitimizing coups becomes easier “when the masses support the coup,” because then the “revolutionary element” is not “limited to the rhetoric of the coupmakers,” a situation with which Wiking claimed to sympathize.¹¹

Wiking linked such questions concerning the legitimacy of coups directly to “morality and norms.”¹² When the masses are unable to select their regime themselves, He contended, “people may and must avail themselves of whatever means they have.... Armed revolution is one of these means, popular support for a coup d’état is another.”¹³ Yet Western researchers and policy-makers have generally adopted an all-or-nothing position by overwhelmingly viewing civil-military relations “through the lens of the liberal-democratic principle that *elected civilian officials must be supreme over the military.*”¹⁴ If non-uniformed agents (civilians) agree that soldiers belong in the barracks, then it will naturally be difficult for them to imagine a scenario in which civilians might desire any other role for their soldiers.

⁹ Nordlinger 1977, 92-93.

¹⁰ Wiking 1983, 32.

¹¹ Wiking 1983, 10.

¹² Wiking 1983, 11.

¹³ Wiking 1983, 11.

¹⁴ Esen and Gumuscu 2017, 60. While I agree with this principle, I am arguing that researchers should not merely assume that the desire for civilian supremacy is universal. The norm against coups is universal, but this does not mean all civilians wish to abide by it.

The result of this thinking is that, first, even where civilians take a lead role in legitimizing coups d'état, observers portray them as the victims of ambitious officers or mistake their actions as *revolutionary*. They may simply be attempting to align their behavior within an existing normative framework that prohibits the use of coups in political competition. Second, the idea that civilians could not have wanted any given coup shifts the blame for normative transgressions onto military officers. This obscures our understanding of such norm-violating behavior, the civilian origins of the anti-coup norm, and the ideational power with which civilians maintain it. The next section reconceptualizes the way that we imagine what constitutes “normal” civil-military relations by returning to civilians their power and agency in coup politics. This is followed by a brief survey of historical evidence from Syria and Iraq to demonstrate the existence of the coup taboo in practice in the early twentieth century.

The Taboo in Theory: Can civilians speak? In coup-prone states, civilians are said to lack agency because they lack guns, but they nevertheless possess ideational sources of authority. Although rarely articulated explicitly, this is plain to researchers of (a) civilian support for coups and (b) resistance to military takeovers.¹⁵ Assumptions from these two sub-literatures also inform a growing literature (c) on the role of norms designed by international organization (IOs), especially the African Union (AU), to prevent coups.¹⁶ There may be theoretical reasons why civilian elites are able to organize support for and

¹⁵ Cf. fn. 3.

¹⁶ Powell, Lasley, and Schiel 2016; Onwumehili 1998; Ikome 2007; Williams 2007; 2009; Souaré 2009; Engel 2010; Witt 2012.

resistance to coups, and inculcate anti-coup norms, such as their greater “social capital”¹⁷ than unknown generals (notable exceptions like Gamal Abdel Nasser and Charles De Gaulle prove the rule); organizational (party-building), material (wealth, patronage), or bureaucratic forms of power resources (single-party preponderance may even inculcate post-coup regimes from further disruptions, whether intentionally or unintentionally).¹⁸

(a) The manifestation of any coup d'état is the product of motive and *opportunity*.¹⁹ Researchers generally agree that, for reasons of legitimacy discussed above, civilian support factors into the coup calculations of military officers. “Plotters who are disposed to attempt a coup,” Powell writes, “will evaluate their ability to carry out the effort before acting.”²⁰ Likewise, Seligson and Carrión caution potential coup plotters to “consider” their popular support.²¹ As an illustrative example, British Ambassador Archibald Clark Kerr estimated that without the support of politician Hikmat Suleiman and his *Ahali* (People) group, “*who could carry with them a large volume of public opinion,*” Iraqi General Bakr al-Sidqi could not have successfully executed a coup in Baghdad in 1936.²² Thus Edward Luttwak’s coup how-to teaches perpetrators to view civilians as either potential supporters of or opponents to coups.²³

¹⁷ Bourdieu 1986, 245-256.

¹⁸ Geddes 2008; Finer 1962, 21; also see Huntington 1990 for a discussion of single parties’ ability to dominate the military during regime transitions.

¹⁹ Finer 1962; Taylor 2003; Powell 2012.

²⁰ Powell 2012, 1021.

²¹ Seligson and Carrión Year, 59-60.

²² My emphasis, Kerr, 1936a, 202.

²³ Luttwak 1979, 57. Moreover, political opponents are only in rare circumstances (e.g., railway workers in early Russia, situations in which there are strong trade unions) in a strong enough position that they must be dealt with before the execution of the coup.

(b) There is somewhat of a growing consensus that civilians are able to resist armed interventions, either by mass mobilization, civil disobedience, or bureaucratic opposition.²⁴ Politicians can mobilize crowds and inspire bureaucrats in resistance to coup attempts²⁵—as Charles De Gaulle did in the 1960s. Richard Snyder claims militaries can only act autonomously if no popular will exerts itself against them.²⁶ While Naunihal Singh, a detractor, argues that what claimed that coup perpetrators must project strength, this suggests that civil resistance could rupture the façade that conspirators need to project strength during critical moments of a coup operation.²⁷

(c) Despite Alfred Stepan’s call to devote volumes to be devoted to the inculcation of anti-coup norms,²⁸ scholars have only recently begun systematically studying the emergence of anti-coup norms, especially in African IOs.²⁹ Rather than explain the slow reduction of coups on the continent with reference to income levels, coup history, or military interests, these scholars argue that IOs have “shown a strong interest in curbing the phenomenon while at the same time emphasizing a commitment to democratic rule.”³⁰ Souaré has found evidence that the Organization of African Unity (OAU)/African Union (AU) has been a “‘norm entrepreneur’ against military coups,” which is included in its list of undesirable Unconstitutional Changes of Government

²⁴ Roberts 1975; Luttwak 1979; Grewal 2018; Finer 1962, 20.

²⁵ Roberts 1975.

²⁶ Snyder 1992, 380.

²⁷ Singh 2014; for a discussion of this problem, see Grewal 2018.

²⁸ Stepan 1988.

²⁹ Onwumechili 1998; Ikome 2007; Williams 2007, 2009; Souaré 2009; Engel 2010; Witt 2012.

³⁰ Powell, Lasley, and Schiel 2016, 483.

(UCG).³¹ The AU's Addis Adaba Charter (February 2012) even seeks to prevent conspirators "from participating in elections held to restore the democratic order or to hold any position of responsibility in political institutions of their state."³² The consequences of violations include public condemnation; suspension from AU decision-making for six months, until the post-coup authorities are in compliance; and, if new regimes do not bring their countries into line with AU rules within six months, then sanctions may begin.³³ Souaré as well as Powell, Lasley, and Schiel have found evidence that from the 1950s to the present African states have "witnessed a meaningful decline in coup activity, an impact even more pronounced than the end of the Cold War."³⁴

The coup taboo differs from existing work on anti-coup norms. First, it places anti-coup norms in the global system at a much earlier date. The AU, for instance, drew from an existing stigma surrounding coups to incorporate the behavior into its list of UCGs. This timeline matters because it means the taboo is not tied *directly* to other normative frameworks, such as democratization,³⁵ but exists as its own standalone social prohibition. Second, it explores how political actors operate within normative anti-coup frameworks rather than explaining the relative strength or weakness of the norm. Thus,

³¹ Souaré 2014, 70.

³² Souaré 2014, 78.

³³ Souaré 2014, 78.

³⁴ Powell, Lasley, and Schiel 2016, 482; and see Souaré 2014, 70.

³⁵ Souaré and Powell *et al.* tie the "emergence" of an anti-coup norm to rising expectations of democratization in Africa specifically and the international system more broadly. In doing so, they both place the rise of democratic norms against the Cold War's demise, while attempting to challenge the explanatory power of the Cold War on the recent reduction in coups. This implies that coups were normatively acceptable during the Cold War because democratic norms were less robust—a claim this essay challenges. See Souaré 2014, 79; Powell, Lasley, and Schiel 2016, 483.

third, the study does not contradict research on the potential role of IOs in reducing the number of coups in recent years. That line of inquiry asks a different question, i.e., about the *effectiveness* of IOs at shaming and sanctioning norm violators.

Normative Coup Environments. Nina Tannenwald wrote in the summer 1999 edition of *International Organization* of a “nuclear taboo,” a norm-based explanation for the United States’s non-use of nuclear weapons in the postwar era. Norms are consensus-based expectations within societies about socially appropriate conduct,³⁶ and thus they “proscribe certain activities and legitimate others.”³⁷ However, rather than discuss different types of *norms*, which “can operate in different ways, and may have multiple effects,” Tannenwald advanced three broad “effects” of norms: (1) regulative, (2) constitutive, and (3) permissive. This study draws on her three “normative effects” in an effort to re-construct *normative coup environments* in Egypt (2013) and Turkey (2016).³⁸

Regulative effects constrain agents’s behaviors within already existing normative and formal institutional frameworks. The main regulative effect of the coup taboo is the prohibition against military coups d’état, which, because the infrequent use of coups exists in current social reality, manifests itself in actors’s justifications and legitimations for behaving in a proscribed manner. Regulative effects may also be found in the conduct of coups and their aftermath, but these effects will likely be specific to particular country-cases. Speaking on the trial that followed the 1962 Aleppo coup attempt, British official H.D. Michell wrote,

³⁶ Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 891; Checkel 2012, 1.

³⁷ Williams 2007, 258.

³⁸ Tannenwald 1999, 437.

There are those Syrians, heartily sick of the Army's meddling in politics, who would like to see the sentences carried out as a salutary deterrent to plotters of future coups. There are others, equally anxious to see the country's stability strengthened, but perhaps more far-sighted, who deprecate the execution of these death sentences not only because feelings will thereby be exacerbated but also because coups of the future will be accompanied by greater violence and bloodshed because the instigators will know that scant mercy awaits them if they fail.³⁹

Thus because of its cascade of coups, Syrian elites weighed the costs-benefits of leniency in hopes to regulate the frequency of and levels of violence in expected future coups.

Constitutive effects construct and categorize our understanding of social processes, such as how we perceive certain actions and identities.⁴⁰ By stigmatizing coups d'état, the taboo has become associated with backwardness, lawlessness, authoritarianism,⁴¹ and incivility, as in branding post-coup regimes as unbecoming for members of the international community of states. This is similar to how the nuclear taboo is embedded in a broader "civilizational" discourse.⁴² The coup taboo's stigmatizing effect is sometimes used to disparage political opponents, as when Donald Trump Tweeted a claim by the *Fox News* network that discussions between two FBI agents about invoking the 25th Amendment amounted to an "illegal" and "treasonous" attempted coup.⁴³ Alan Dershowitz added a "civilizational" dimension to this affair by

³⁹ FO 371/170595, 1011/63, EY1015/10, 22 January 1963.

⁴⁰ Tannenwald 1999, 437.

⁴¹ The automatic association of coups with autocracy is irksome to researchers who have studied the prospects of post-coup democratization, especially coups that occur within autocracies. See, e.g., Miller, 2012; 2016; Thyne and Powell 2016; Varol 2017.

⁴² Tannenwald 1999, 437.

⁴³ Timm 2019, 2.

asserting, in agreement with *Fox News* host Tucker Carlson, that this discussion of the 25th was the stuff of “third-world countries.”⁴⁴

The global norm of democracy reinforces the view that coups are an illegitimate form of regime selection, and in some cases may even result in a country losing development or other types of aid.⁴⁵ In order to be a functioning democracy societies and states must avoid naked demonstrations of force and violence, such as coups d'état. While anti-coup norms are separate from pro-democracy norms, the fact that there is considerable overlap means that the discourse of democracy and democratization is often evoked during coup environments.⁴⁶ Coup perpetrators also use contemporary normative discourses to legitimate their actions. Egypt's coup movement in July 2013 drew heavily on rhetoric about the anti-democratic nature of Islamism, thus branding a democratically elected president as a dictator. Similarly, coup-makers in both Egypt (2013) and Turkey (2016) drew on Washington's post-September 11, 2001, anti-terrorism discourse. The Sisi and Erdoğan regimes used media campaigns to brand, respectively, the Brotherhood and the Gülenists as “terrorists.” While Sisi used anti-terror norms to legitimate a coup d'état, both leaders claimed to be fighting terror to justify crackdowns on their opponents.

Permissive effects, or unintended consequences of constitutive norms, “particularly taboos,” focus our attention on the specific prohibition in question and thus “selectively divert our normative gaze” away from other social consequences.⁴⁷ There are two primary permissive effects of the coup taboo. First, strong proscriptions against

⁴⁴ Stanley-Becker 2019, 14.

⁴⁵ Grewal and Kureshi 2018.

⁴⁶ For empirical examples, see, e.g., Souaré 2014; Powell, Lasley, and Schiel 2016.

⁴⁷ Tannenwald 1999, 437.

military coups d'état produce calls for strong punishments. The norm can therefore be used as a weapon against political opponents. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, for instance, justified a brutal crackdown on opponents after the failed July 2016 coup.

Second, the taboo has, at least in the Middle East, produced a parallel normative framework that allows soldiers and civilians to seize power while branding their actions as revolutionary. Despite their repeated violations of anti-coup norms, Middle East conspirators have demonstrated sensitivity to allegations of flouting the taboo. Forced to publicly legitimate their transgressions, these cliques have reproduced the very normative boundary between civil and military spheres from which the taboo originates. Tension between these contradictory activities has become so routinized that one could call it a “culture of coups,” a dual normative framework that is a particular feature of Middle East coup politics. Putschists can, in short, seize power using the language of revolution, so long as they firmly denounce military coups d'état.

We observe the operation of the taboo when it is contravened. Violations of a social injunction provoke condemnation, disapproval, or stigmatizing language, and require transgressors to make an effort to legitimate, justify, or deny their breach of a norm.⁴⁸ Thus a good assessment of the power of a norm is “the level of opprobrium community members attract from others for engaging in behaviour that violates the norm.”⁴⁹ The existence of criminal activity, for instance, should not lead observers to conclude that rules proscribing crime have failed, so long as society makes some effort to

⁴⁸ Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 892.

⁴⁹ Souaré 2014, 76-77; see also Williams 2007, 258.

prosecute and convict offenders.⁵⁰ A norm's existence is only questionable when its repeated violation provokes no shame or condemnation.

The Taboo & Coup Politics in the Middle East

This section assesses the coup taboo in historical and contemporary cases of normative coup environments, i.e., when domestic and international attention focuses on the politics of military coups. The first half of this empirical study surveys some history of the taboo in Syria, Iraq, and Turkey (1940s-1970s). While this falls short of a complete study of the origins of the taboo, it nevertheless demonstrates that political agents have had to confront the stigma of coups d'état since at least the first half of the twentieth century. The next two sections examine the coup taboo in Egypt (2013) and Turkey (2016), which differ in that one coup succeeded (Egypt) and one failed (Turkey). The contemporary case studies accomplish three tasks. They show reactions of opprobrium in the aftermath of coup events, first, at the domestic level and, second, in the international system. Third, they examine attempts to legitimate coups to bring them in line with social expectations of acceptable behavior. The case studies are followed by a discussion of alternative explanations for these domestic and international responses to coups d'état.

Historical Cases: Syria, Iraq, & Turkey. Accounting for his having violated the coup taboo by working with General Bakr al-Sidqi to seize power, radical politician Hikmat Suleiman stressed that since incumbent elites had violated democratic norms, there was

⁵⁰ Souaré 2014, 76-77.

“nothing left...except the Army...so we resorted to the Army.”⁵¹ His colleagues were less understanding of this transgression. “I have never been comfortable,” wrote Iraqi Chief of Staff Taha al-Hashimi, “with the army’s involvement in politics....”⁵² Hashimi expressed in his memoirs his utter disappointment in Iraqi army’s involvement in such a “shameful” act, referring to the Suleiman-Sidqi coup d’état.⁵³ Iraqi politician Tawfiq Suweidi and Brigadier Khairallah Talfah expressed discomfort that the 1936 coup opened the door to a politicized army.⁵⁴

After the August 11, 1937 murder of General Sidqi, then-PM Suleiman was tasked with upholding anti-coup norms that he had only too recently broken. Having immediately recognized the assassination not as an “isolated act of revenge, but...a conspiracy against Bekr Sidki’s life,”⁵⁵ PM Suleiman “*with great courage*, went personally to the citadel and harangued” the ideologically divided Baghdad garrison, “with some temporary effect.”⁵⁶ One of the principal actors behind the coup, District Commander of Mosul General Amin al-Umari, legitimized his defiance to Suleiman’s government by making contact with commanders at Kirkuk and Baghdad and winning their sympathy with reference to anti-coup norms. The three commanders soon handed Suleiman a list of demands, which included, among other things, “The banishment of all

⁵¹ Emphasis added, as cited in Tarbush 1982, 121.

⁵² Hashimi 1967, 138.

⁵³ Hashimi 1967, 138.

⁵⁴ Talfah 1976; Suweidi 2010, 238.

⁵⁵ FO 406/75, p. 104-106.

⁵⁶ FO 406/75, 104-106.

officers who supported the [29 October] coup d'état,” and “*The passing of legislation forbidding participation in politics by army leaders.*”⁵⁷

Ironically, debates in the Iraqi Chamber (the lower house of parliament) erupted in February 1938 over a bill that would indemnify the perpetrators of the 1937 coup against Suleiman’s government. Some parties to the debate casted aspersions on the Suleiman government, while others, including Gen. Taha al-Hashimi (whose brother Yasin al-Hashimi had been ousted by Sidqi and Suleiman), argued that pardoning lawbreakers, whether friend or foe, teaches them impunity upon triumph.⁵⁸ The bill produced another hostile debate on March 17, 1938, when eventual coup perpetrator Rashid Ali al-Gaylani blasted the Suleiman government (the latter ousted Gaylani from his Interior post in Yasin al-Hashimi’s cabinet) and its method for assuming power in 1936. With “unparliamentary frankness,” then-PM Jamil Madfai—who Gaylani and Yasin al-Hashimi sacked in 1935 by “engineering” a tribal uprising—reminded Gaylani of his own past. Making their way into the Iraqi press, these aggressive exchanges led to calls for judicial investigations into the charges parliamentarians had leveled against one another. Rashid Ali and other ex-Ministers of Yasin al-Hashimi’s cabinet claimed that PM Madfai allowed their detractors to “drag their names in the mud.”⁵⁹

The next coup (December 1938) therefore occurred in an environment in which politicians were sensitive to their reputations as schemers. The British estimated that, like the Suleiman-Sidqi coup of October 1936, this was a civil-military putsch, which was executed by politician Nuri al-Sa’id and Chief of the General Staff, General Taha al-

⁵⁷ My emphasis, FO 406/75, 104-106.

⁵⁸ FO 406/76, p. 98, telegram no. 36.

⁵⁹ FO 406/76, p. 99-100, telegram no. 38.

Hashimi.⁶⁰ A British official, Maurice Peterson, noted of the coup,

I paid my first call on Nuri Pasha this morning.... I told him that, glad as I was to see him in office, I could not but regret the method by which he had arrived there. It seemed a great pity that the army had again been brought into politics.... Nuri Pasha said that there were only two instruments by which the army could be controlled: Parliament and the King. The previous Government had neglected both of these instruments. Pressed to define his meaning, he could only, as regards Parliament, promise a general election....⁶¹

Thus Nuri al-Sa'id punted on the question of the army's intervention into politics while hinting at a return to *civilian rule*.

Only slightly more than a decade later the leadership of the Syrian *Hizb al-Ba'ath al-'Arabi* (Arab Resurrection Party [ARP]), Michel 'Aflaq, Jalal al-Sayyad, and Salah al-Din al-Bitar, held internal party debates over the Syrian Army's potential role in their *Inqilab* (coup/revolution). Two broad views emerged. One perspective held that military intervention is acceptable only if it benefits the party, but is otherwise unacceptable. The stance of the second group was that the acceptability of military coups must not be contingent. Since coups are not appropriate, such a move would be objectionable even if in the party's interest. While the former view eventually prevailed when a radical populist from Hama, Akram al-Hawrani, joined the ARP, this particular debate sided with the latter view, which was favored by the ARP leadership.⁶²

This view largely went unchanged for the duration of the era in which the *Hizb al-Ba'ath al-Arabi al-Ishtiraki* (ASRP/Ba'ath; Arab Socialist Resurrection Party) routinely partnered with officers to seize power via coup. The ASRP leadership, wrote Patrick Seale, "*did not like military regimes* but could not but applaud the eclipse of the

⁶⁰ FO 406/75, p. 32-33, telegram no. 29.

⁶¹ FO 406/75, p. 112, telegram no. 61.

⁶² Mardini 1988, 121-122.

traditional conservative parties.”⁶³ Even in 1966 shortly before a bloody coup sent him into exile, Michel ‘Aflaq complained, “We hope to change the function of the Army by preventing the officers from forming a bloc inside the leadership of the party.... There is no real revolutionary party in the world whose leaders are military men continuing to command army units.”⁶⁴ The civilian leadership of the Syria-ASRP was acutely aware of the taboo and used legitimizing language after their coups. In Figure 1, the headline of *al-Ba’ath* reads, “The forces of unity are designed to protect the *revolution* [of March 8, 1963].”⁶⁵ In Figure 2 *al-Ba’ath* reads, “The masses/people...revolve around our *Arab revolution* [of March 8, 1963]. Federal unity is the aim of the Arab people today.”⁶⁶

Thus in the 1960s, the Ba’athist leadership in Syria were working to legitimate coups. Meanwhile, their Ba’athist counterparts in Iraq, President General Hassan al-Bakr and Saddam Hussein, were “ensuring that the military returned to the barracks, guaranteeing civilian domination of the Iraqi political process and the subordination of the armed forces to a civilian administration.”⁶⁷ This decade, however, also marked a major rupture in the robust culture of civilian control in Turkey. In the 1920s-1950s, Turkey’s political elite had inculcated anti-coup norms, so that conspirators were constrained by the CHP’s strong distaste for military intervention. When a subversive army clique sounded-out CHP leadership in 1957 for its support for a potential coup, for instance, İsmet İnönü flatly rebuffed the soldiers—agreeing neither to condone nor support their efforts.

⁶³ Seale 1965/1986, 116.

⁶⁴ As cited in Dawisha 1986, 25; and see Weinberger 1986, 71; Al-Marashi and Salama 2008, 102.

⁶⁵ Al-Ba’ath 1963, 1.

⁶⁶ Al-Ba’ath 1963, 2.

⁶⁷ Al-Marashi and Salama 2008, 112-113.



Figure 1. Front page headline of March 16, 1963 *al-Ba'ath* newspaper, the official newspaper of the Syrian Ba'ath Party.



Figure 2. Center, second and third lines down from top, in that order) of March 16, 1963 *al-Ba'ath* newspaper, the official newspaper of the Syrian Ba'ath Party.

İnönü began flirting with the idea only in 1959-60 when the CHP viewed military intervention as more desirable than the continued rule of the *Demokrat Parti* (DP). Failing to secure İnönü's support, the conspirators were forced "to wait for the *civilians to take the lead in creating an environment destructive of the political system.*"⁶⁸ As political conditions in the country increasingly favored the CHP's increasingly autocratic rival, the DP, İnönü adopted a new position on coups: he would pave the way for a "revolution" led by the military. Publicly endorsing military rule would have crossed a normative redline, so İnönü instead began to slowly legitimize the idea of *revolution*, not a *coup*, against the DP. In İnönü's private residence, however, he told a group of retired officers on 17 April 1960, "that it was up to them, and to the military, to protect the soundness of Turkish society and the ideals of Turkish progress and development."⁶⁹ Following the coup d'état in May 1960, the Turkish High Command took an increasingly active role in Turkish political life.

The command's brazen dominance of the Turkish military and society won it disdain among the public and elite. The breaking point was the military leadership's flaunting its meddling in the 1997 coup event. At a meeting on February 28, 1997, the *Milli Güvenlik Kurulu* (MGK; National Security Council) reached a set of decisions, handed them to Welfare Party leader and then-Prime Minister, Necmettin Erbakan, and forced him to sign. Tanks soon appeared in the streets of Ankara,⁷⁰ and, according to Chief of General Staff General İsmail Hakkı Karadayı, "the government was presented to

⁶⁸ Harris 1970, 444; see also Harris 1965b, 172; Karpaz 2004, 247. For details on İnönü's rejection of the soldiers' offer, see Harris 1965a, 64.

⁶⁹ My emphasis, Lerner and Robinson 1960, 43.

⁷⁰ Yavuz and Demirbas 2009.

Mesut Yılmaz, a former ANAVATAN leader, on a silver platter.”⁷¹ Reflecting the MGK’s arrogance after this “coup by memorandum,” Gen. Karadayı bragged that he told Erbakan, “leave, and he did.”⁷²

The *Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri* (TSK; Turkish Armed Forces), which had “long been the country’s leading undeclared political party,” gave off an image that it could do whatever it pleases, regardless of the political consequences.⁷³ Epitomizing the high command’s *padişah* vision of itself, by then retired Karadayı’s “brazen comments,” revealed in 2009 via a series of voice recordings—posted on the Haber7 website—featured shameless, unfiltered confessions of his role in all of Turkey’s coups d’état, “without any indirect, covert remarks or even the slightest attempt to conceal” his “purpose of intervening in the democratic process.”⁷⁴ The fact that he was only comfortable expressing the views behind closed doors; the resulting public and elite outrage; and the scandalized nature of the audiotapes were indicative of the coup taboo. “All militaries,” even the TSK, “must care to some degree about public good will.”⁷⁵

The TSK’s blatant admission of violations of anti-coup norms led the Turkish political elite and public to activate normative and legal boundaries and begin to reduce the military’s role in politics. Gen. Karadayı was “soon be behind bars as a suspect for plotting to overthrow civilian and democratically elected governments.”⁷⁶ Aided by

⁷¹ Today’s Zaman 2009, 4.

⁷² Today’s Zaman 2009, 9.

⁷³ Aydınli 2012, 102.

⁷⁴ Today’s Zaman 2009, 6.

⁷⁵ Aydınli 2012, 102.

⁷⁶ Today’s Zaman 2009, 7.

pressure from the European Union,⁷⁷ which reflected the internationalized status of the coup taboo, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP; Justice and Development Party)—and their ally, Fethullah Gülen’s *Hizmet* (Service) organization—began cutting short the TSK’s dominant position in the country’s affairs.⁷⁸ After its botched coup by electronic memorandum (e-memo) in 2007, which weighed-in on a presidential election, the MGK “found itself in a state of political retreat.”⁷⁹ The same year, the authorities launched their now infamous investigation into *Ergenekon*—an alleged secular, ultra-nationalist conspiratorial network supposedly linked to the “deep state”—which passed down 23 indictments on the TSK, including of top officials like the former Armed Forces Chief General Ilker Basbug.⁸⁰

Egypt, July 2013. When he assumed office on June 3, 2012, Morsi struck a deal with the SCAF, which was Egypt’s executive authority since Hosni Mubarak’s resignation.⁸¹ The pact was a textbook case of guaranteeing military “prerogatives” in exchange for military non-interference,⁸² which liberal Egyptian politician Amr Hamzawi wrote confidently of the pact.⁸³ The irony is that while the pact *reduced the army’s interest* in re-intervention, it made Morsi more vulnerable to a coup because it isolated him among *civilian supporters*. The optics of the 2012 pact confirmed fears of betrayal among the president’s

⁷⁷ Aydınli 2012, 103.

⁷⁸ Aydınli 2012, 104; Esen and Gumuscu 2017, 60; Akyol 2016, 7-13.

⁷⁹ Esen and Gumuscu 2017, 60; and see Aydınli 2012, 104.

⁸⁰ Aydınli 2012, 104; Al-Jazeera 2013; Al-Jazeera 2012, 5-6.

⁸¹ Albrecht and Bishara 2011, 15-17.

⁸² See, e.g., Huntington 1991; O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Stepan 1988.

⁸³ As cited in El Mahdy 2013, 1.

opponents. Khaled Fahmy acutely observed, “[Morsi] could have turned to...the revolution...to Tahrir. We would have come to his rescue. And instead, he tried to flirt with the police and the military....”⁸⁴

The Tahrir Square of 2011 was one in which “bearded” Muslim Brothers praying *en masse*, “their skin scarred by the torture of Mubarak’s security state, *embraced secular Egyptian liberals and declared common cause.*”⁸⁵ The military was keenly aware that armies need legitimacy to exercise influence in the political process,⁸⁶ and so early in the transition the *Ikhwan* nurtured the Islamist-secular liberal coalition to reduce the officers’ civilian supporters.⁸⁷ The Brotherhood mobilized their supporters and secular activists into Tahrir Square when the army shuttered the parliament on the eve of Morsi’s presidential victory.⁸⁸ As far back as November 2011 the Brotherhood joined mass protests to challenge the Wafdist Ali al-Selmi’s so-called “Principles,” which predetermined the constitutional drafting process in favor of army prerogatives.⁸⁹ The latter demonstrations led Field Marshall Tantawi to declare, “The army is ready to go back to the barracks immediately if the people wish.”⁹⁰

Failing to secure the support of Tahrir, Morsi exposed himself to the coming attacks on his presidency from unsympathetic oligarchic elites who, despite spending

⁸⁴ As cited in Sennott 2013, 119.

⁸⁵ Cohen 2016, 2, emphasis added.

⁸⁶ On legitimacy and coups, see, e.g., Finer 1962; Powell 2012.

⁸⁷ Fahim 2012, 29.

⁸⁸ Kaminski 2012, 1, 12; Kouddous 2013, 17-19.

⁸⁹ Roll 2015, 29; El Amrani 2012, 2-3, 20.

⁹⁰ As cited in Awad and Perry 2011, 3.

millions on the *Ikhwan's* opponents in parliamentary and presidential elections,⁹¹ lost in both contests. Old regime remnants (*feloul*) seized upon a November 22 decree to widen polarization and legitimate the idea that power should be negotiated with weapons. At that point, business and media oligarchs, and so-called “deep state” elites,⁹² declared open warfare on the Brother’s presidency⁹³ by intentionally fueling a legitimacy crisis. This was the opening salvo in a months-long process to legitimate the eventual coup of July 3, 2013.

While the ancien régime fueled deadly street clashes that spiraled into February 2013, the Ministry of Interior led a rapprochement with the military leadership,⁹⁴ steadily convincing the officers to treat Brotherhood members as terrorists. The Interior’s General Intelligence Service, meanwhile, encouraged angry young *Kefaya* (Enough) activists to hit the streets. In April 2013, six weeks later, Mahmoud Badr, Moheb Doss, Walid el-Masry, Mohammed Abdel Aziz, and Hassan Shahin organized *Tamarod* (Rebel), which circulated a petition demanding Morsi’s resignation. Business and media oligarchs created an echo chamber of dehumanization against the Brotherhood and secretly funded *Tamarod*.⁹⁵ Members of the Supreme Constitutional Court supported the movement, as did political parties of all stripes (e.g., liberal, Salafi, Arab nationalist, Trotskyist), as well as Egypt’s major labor unions, the Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II, and the Grand

⁹¹ Roll 2013, 19-20.

⁹² See, e.g., El Amrani 2012; Momani, 2013; Saleh 2013.

⁹³ Roll 2015, 31; Kouddous and Salazar 2011, 11; Hubbard and Kirkpatrick 2013, 2, 6.

⁹⁴ They were Mubarak-era rivals. See, e.g., Makara 2013, 346.

⁹⁵ As revealed in the voice-verified #Sisileaks audiotapes, the UAE and Saudi Arabia also financed Morsi’s ouster. See Hertsgaard 2015, 22; Kingsley 2015, 7-13.

Sheikh of *al-Azhar* Ahmed al-Tayyeb.⁹⁶ Figure 3 is a poster of the elite-backed Egyptian *Tamarod* movement. The sign reads, “Get out [top]. The people want the fall of the Brotherhood [Bottom].”

Three *Tamarod* co-founders were directly enlisted in the conspiracy. Moheb Doss admitted frankly in July 2013 that Badr, Abdel Aziz, and Shahin were “under the direct guidance of Egyptian army and intelligence officials.”⁹⁷ Just prior to General Sisi’s June 25 ultimatum to President Morsi, Badr surprised and contradicted internal discussions of *Tamarod*’s leadership when at a press conference he repeatedly called on the Egyptian public to support Sisi and the army. On July 3, with tanks occupying Cairo and helicopters overhead, Badr veered from *Tamarod*’s carefully scripted remarks to request, in front of Tahrir Square’s crowds, that the army arrest and remove Morsi from the presidential palace, to protect Egyptians from terrorists.⁹⁸

These efforts to legitimate the coup were not lost on observers who recognized it for what it was. Liberal politician and academic Amr Hamzawi wrote in his *Al Sharouk* column that Egypt’s liberal elite rushed into an “unconditional alliance with the military establishment during moments of conflict with the Brotherhood without deep reflection on the essence of democracy or commitment to its mechanisms.”⁹⁹ Hamzawi was shouting at a country that had been mobilized in support of a coup by elites like Naguib Sawiris, who funded *Tamarod* to the tune of \$28 million USD, Sawiris offered lots of

⁹⁶ Alsharif and Saleh 2013, 6-12, 31-35; Hertsgaard 2015; Hubbard and Kirkpatrick 2013, 2-6, 16, 26; Jemet 2017, 189-191; Kaminski 2012, 12; Kouddous 2013, 1-3, 11-33; Momani 2013, 7; Saleh 2013, 3, 14. Not all anti-Morsi activists supported the coup, although plenty did. See Kouddous 2013, 12-15.

⁹⁷ Frenkel and Atef 2014, 9; also Giglio 2013, 2.

⁹⁸ Frenkel and Atef 2014, 1-3, 16, 23-30; Giglio 2013, 2, 9-10, 18; Jemet 2017, 190-193.

⁹⁹ Hamzawi 2013, 2.



Figure 3. Photo captured by author in Cairo, July 2013.

publicity (including a music video that he commissioned) via his newspapers and TV channels.¹⁰⁰ His self-described “political channel,” ONTV, led the media assault on the Brotherhood. He operated ONTV at a loss, and “became bored” after the coup and sold it to pro-Sisi business tycoon Ahmed Abu Hashimi.¹⁰¹ Upon announcing the purchase, Abu Hashimi praised ONTV and Sawiris for confronting Egypt’s pre-coup “dangers.”¹⁰²

Even with the backing of the *Tamarod* and massive public demonstrations, in the wake of the July coup General Sisi took pains to “create the impression” that he had seized power “only very reluctantly, at the request of the Egyptian people.”¹⁰³ His media

¹⁰⁰ Kenner 2013, 4-6.

¹⁰¹ Shams el-Din 2016, 9.

¹⁰² As cited in Shams el-Din 2016, 8.

¹⁰³ Kingsley 2015, 10.

backers persistently claimed “that Morsi’s removal constituted a revolution, *not a coup*.”¹⁰⁴ When in 2015 a series of (voice authenticated) audio tapes that revealed Sisi discussing the conspiracy were broadcast by an Islamist television station in Turkey, Mekameleen, the President’s media supporters attacked the credibility of the reports based on their origins. “They are fabricating and faking the voices,” claimed Ahmed Moussa, a Sisi mouthpiece, “because there are big international institutions working with those people and providing them with the highest level of technology.”¹⁰⁵

Revolutionary discourse was spread and performed by *Tamarod* on the Egyptian street.¹⁰⁶ On top of the civil-military celebrations—which included colorful airshows by the Air Force and green laser shows—demonstrators were encouraged to tell the world what happened in Tahrir was, “Not a coup” (see Figure 4). Many public figures parroted the idea that this was a “people’s revolution,” such as Rev. Dr. Mouneer Hanna Anis, Bishop of the Episcopal/Anglican Diocese of Egypt. He was quoted as saying,

The Armed Forces *took the side of the millions of Egyptians who demonstrated in the streets* since the 30th of June against President Mursi and the Muslim Brotherhood.... The Armed Forces *responded to the invitation of the people to intervene and force the President to step down at the request of the people of Egypt*.¹⁰⁷

Not all prominent Egyptians endorsed this violation of anti-coup norms. Liberal politician and academic Amr Hamzawi criticized fellow liberals for their “unconditional alliance with the military establishment during moments of conflict with the Brotherhood without

¹⁰⁴ My emphasis, Kingsley 2015, 10.

¹⁰⁵ Kingsley 2015, 19-20.

¹⁰⁶ For a full accounting of the Tamarod movement’s activities, see Jumet 2017.

¹⁰⁷ My emphasis, McDonnell 2013, 2.



Figure 4. Demonstration in Tahrir Square. Source: McDonnell 2013.

deep reflection about the essence of democracy.”¹⁰⁸ However, an overwhelming number of public officials endorsed the takeover, thus contributing to its revolutionary appeal.

A mixed bag of condemnation and carefully crafted disregard flowed into Cairo from the international community. Speaking for the U.K., William Hague stated,

It is the problem with a military intervention, of course, that it is a precedent for the future.... That’s why it is so important to entrench democratic institutions and for political leaders...to work on this together to find the compromises they haven’t been able to make in Egypt over the last year.¹⁰⁹

A spokesman for David Cameron also tied the coup to democratic norms, stating, “We always condemn military intervention in democratic systems. What we want and what we support is a democratic future for Egypt.”¹¹⁰ The German Foreign Minister, Guido

¹⁰⁸ Hamzawi 2013, 2.

¹⁰⁹ Alexander 2013, 1.

¹¹⁰ Alexander 2013, 2.

Westerwelle, called the coup “a major setback for democracy in Egypt.”¹¹¹ So too did Turkey’s Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, who said,

Only can you be removed from duty through elections, that is, the will of the people. It is unacceptable for a government, which has come to power through democratic elections, to be toppled through illicit means *and even more, a military coup.*¹¹²

Thus Davutoglu made special note of coups as a particularly problematic endeavor, not merely an affiliated norm of democracy.

More neutral statements arrived from Russia and China. The Russian foreign ministry, without mentioning a coup, asked for “all political forces in Egypt to exercise restraint” and “prove that they strive to solve the brewing political and socio-economic problems in a democratic framework, without violence, and accounting for the interests of all social groups and religious confessions.”¹¹³ A spokeswoman for the Chinese foreign ministry noted that Beijing “respects *the choice of the Egyptian people,*” before urging Egyptians to avoid bloodshed and engage in “dialogue.”¹¹⁴ Thus while Moscow sidestepped the categorization of events in Egypt, China certified the junta’s rhetoric in referring to the coup as a matter of popular will.

Even Arab leaders who had backed the Arab Thermador since 2011 either avoided the question of the coup’s status or used legitimizing discourse. Rather than certify General Sisi, the coup-maker, the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani sent congratulations to the Chief Justice of the Egyptian Supreme Constitutional

¹¹¹ Alexander 2013, 5.

¹¹² My emphasis, Alexander 2013, 4.

¹¹³ Alexander 2013, 6.

¹¹⁴ Alexander 2013, 7.

Court, Adly Mansour, upon his swearing-in interim president.¹¹⁵ Syria's Bashar al-Assad took the opportunity to chastise the Brotherhood by drawing on the world's phobia of Islamist movements, noting, "Whoever brings religion to use for political or factional interests will fall anywhere in the world."¹¹⁶ Syrian State television called the Egyptian coup movement a "national, populist movement."¹¹⁷ Leadership in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (hereafter KSA), as well as their partners in crime, the Emirates, funded the popular opposition to Morsi to assist in the legitimation of the coup. More telling, KSA officials reportedly "promised Sisi that they would replace any military or economic aid cut off by Washington *in the aftermath of the regime change*," a move which Riyadh made when Washington cut aid to Pakistan in 1998 for violating norms against nuclear tests.¹¹⁸ The Saudis, in other words, recognized in advance that a violation of the coup taboo would have consequences for Cairo. Even before Qatar's Sheikh Tamim, Saudi King Abdallah congratulated interim president Mansour, an endorsement which was followed by a public phone call to Gen. Sisi.¹¹⁹

The American response was important because of the US's economic, military, and moral leadership in the international system, as well as its powerful position within international organizations and its ability to turn off the faucet of aid money. On July 4, 2013, the day after General Sisi's coup d'état, officials in the Obama administration's National Security Council met in expectation to debate the "coup law," a "statute that

¹¹⁵ Alexander 2013, 8.

¹¹⁶ Alexander 2013, 10.

¹¹⁷ Alexander 2013, 11.

¹¹⁸ Riedel 2013, 3.

¹¹⁹ Riedel 2013, 2.

requires cutting off aid to any military that topples an elected government.”¹²⁰ Instead, Obama announced to the NSC that the United States “*could not call Morsi’s ouster a coup d’état.*”¹²¹ The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Martin Dempsey (and Ben Rhodes), asked if the administration would lose credibility “if it did not call the coup what it was?”¹²² Then-Secretary of State John Kerry, however, argued that “Morsi’s removal *was not, in fact, a coup.* Sisi was bowing to *the public will* and acting to save Egypt.”¹²³ The administration’s to determine if Morsi’s ouster was a coup led some White House staffers to privately refer to it as a “couplike event.”¹²⁴

Ahead of July 3rd, Obama simply told reporters that Morsi’s opponents should abide by “legal, legitimate processes” to remove the democratically elected president.¹²⁵ After Morsi’s ouster, the administration publicly avoided “questions over the legality of military aid to Egypt,” and in one instance Obama’s press secretary Jay Carney nakedly declared it was not in the US’s “best interests” to determine if the armed intervention in Egypt was a coup.¹²⁶ The administration would not suspend aid to Egypt until it reviewed the military’s behavior “during and after” the ouster, perhaps suggesting officials hoped that they would not have to certify the coup if the generals swiftly turned over authority to civilians.¹²⁷ Obama officials also evoked anti-democratic expectations of Islamists,

¹²⁰ Emphasis added, Kirkpatrick 2018, 2. The law, Sec. 7008 is restrictive enough to include coups or a “decree in which the military plays a decisive role.” See Leahy 2013, 1.

¹²¹ Kirkpatrick 2018, 1.

¹²² Kirkpatrick 2018, 2-3.

¹²³ Kirkpatrick 2018, 2-3.

¹²⁴ Kirkpatrick 2018, 2-3.

¹²⁵ Kirkpatrick 2018, 1.

¹²⁶ Roberts 2013, 1-2.

¹²⁷ Roberts 2013, 1-2.

such as in stating that democracy is more than elections and that Morsi too often disregarded the viewpoints of his opponents.¹²⁸ Jay Carney even used the junta's legitimating discourse, noting, "It is important to acknowledge that tens of millions of Egyptians have legitimate grievances with Morsi's undemocratic form of government and do not believe it is a coup."¹²⁹ The White House maintained this position even in the face of growing pressure from congress, especially the late Senator John McCain, who said,

It is difficult for me to conclude that what happened was anything other than a coup in which the military played a decisive role.... I do not want to suspend our critical assistance to Egypt but I believe *that is the right thing to do* at this time.¹³⁰

The administration was unwavering in its refusal to certify events in Egypt as a coup d'état, even when congressional officials evoked the taboo.

Yet on July 4th, Pres. Obama angered the Egyptian street with a puzzling statement, probably designed to give everyone what they wanted. It read:

We believe that ultimately the future of Egypt *can only be determined by the Egyptian people*. Nevertheless, we are deeply concerned by *the decision of the Egyptian armed forces to remove* President Morsi and suspend the Egyptian constitution. I now call on the Egyptian military to move quickly and responsibly to return full authority back to a democratically elected civilian government as soon as possible through an inclusive and transparent process....¹³¹

The use of "nevertheless" serves to qualify the opening line, which repeats the argument advanced by the junta, i.e., the *people decided* Egypt's fate. Yet even while avoiding the phrase "coup," the statement also says that *the armed forces decided* to remove Morsi. In response, *Tamarod* mobilized and directed demonstrations against Obama. On July 5th,

¹²⁸ Roberts 2013, 10.

¹²⁹ Roberts 2013, 10-11.

¹³⁰ As cited in Roberts 2013, 8-9, emphasis added.

¹³¹ Alexander 2013, 3.

Egyptian organizers passed out signs reading, in English, “Obama administration, X [bad], U.S. people, heart [good/love]” (see Figure 5).

IOs also operated according to the framework of the taboo. For instance, the UN’s Ban Ki Moon issued a statement urging a “speedy resumption of *civilian rule*.”¹³² Most consequential for Egypt was the African Union’s (AU) July 5 decision to suspend Cairo’s membership, citing an unconstitutional change in government (UCG). While the AU shied away from specifying the type of UCG, likely to avoid angering the Egyptian street,¹³³ it nevertheless broke ranks with the international community in taking *action* against Egypt’s post-coup government. The suspension “reflected poorly on Egypt’s diplomatic standing” in Africa and beyond, especially when the AU’s High-Level Panel on Egypt visited Cairo to document the political scene and issue a series of unflattering reports about the post-coup environment. Egypt joined a list of sanctioned AU countries that were not invited to a US-Africa summit at the White House in August 2014.¹³⁴

Thus while officials in Cairo tried to “brush off the rebuke as inconsequential,” they “frantically” initiated a “diplomatic offensive—sending envoys to African capitals lobbying for the reversal of the decision.”¹³⁵ “Egypt fought tooth and nail for its reinstatement to the AU,” writes Solomon Dersso. “...Cairo insisted the AU had *failed to understand the situation* in Egypt and had taken a misguided decision.”¹³⁶ As well, the authorities persistently argued that, “events of July 3 *were the result of a popular uprising*, pure and simple, and therefore did not amount to an unconstitutional change of

¹³² As cited in Alexander 2013, 12, my emphasis.

¹³³ Dersso 2014a, 4.

¹³⁴ Dersso 2014b, 5-7.

¹³⁵ Dersso 2014b, 3-4.

¹³⁶ My emphasis, Dersso 2014b, 8.



Figure 5. Source: author, Cairo, July 2013.

government.¹³⁷ That Cairo’s coup-makers denied, justified, and legitimated their transgression—while under international pressure—is good evidence of a coup taboo.¹³⁸

Turkey, July 2016. When the Turkish crowds withstood an abortive coup on July 15, 2016, many observers argued that the coup failed because the perpetrators lacked “political and popular support,” and thus could not legitimize the coup.¹³⁹ Parliamentarian Sezgin Tanrikulu (CHP) claimed the coup failed because of unity between all political parties, civil society, and the media.¹⁴⁰ Leader of *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* (MHP; Nationalist Movement Party) Devlet Bahçeli thanked every Turkish

¹³⁷ My emphasis, Dersso 2014b, 9.

¹³⁸ Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 892.

¹³⁹ Esen and Gumuscu 2017, 60.

¹⁴⁰ Uras 2016, 7.

citizen for defending the country when “the national will was attacked openly.”¹⁴¹ As discussed, the stigma of coups means that public acceptance of a coup will exact legitimation from coup perpetrators, such as elections and popular mobilization.¹⁴² The reverse is also true: political leaders can shame coup perpetrators, brand them as criminals, and flood the streets with supporters to de-legitimize coups.

In July 2016, conspirators seized a radio station to present Turks with a *fait accompli*,¹⁴³ but their message fell on deaf ears. “Civilian resistance played a large role in the defeat of the rebels,” noted Danny Orbach, “as angry crowds surrounded their tanks and all major opposition parties denounced them.”¹⁴⁴ The coup attempt was the flip side of Tahrir Square’s argument: the *people* decided *against* a coup. Egyptian politician Hamdeen Sabahi explicitly made this argument by noting the “irony” that the Turkish people proved July 2016 was a coup and “that what happened in Egypt on June 30 [2013] was a *popular revolution*.”¹⁴⁵

The coup attempt was also further evidence that the coup taboo, while related to democratic norms, occupies a distinct normative position in social space. The attempt occurred at a moment in which Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was under international pressure “for stifling dissent at home, including by journalists, academics, opposition politicians and others.”¹⁴⁶ Thus despite experience with and future

¹⁴¹ As cited in Hurriyet 2016, 12.

¹⁴² See, e.g., Grewal and Kureshi 2018 on “selling a coup” with elections.

¹⁴³ Singh 2014 explains why this is a necessary condition for the success of a coup. For a Turkey-specific critique of the *fait accompli* in coups, see Orbach 2017.

¹⁴⁴ Orbach 2017, 26.

¹⁴⁵ As cited in Badir 2016, 3, my emphasis.

¹⁴⁶ Pop and Walker 2016, 8.

expectations of repression at the hands of Erdoğan and his *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP; Justice and Development Party), the actions of the conspirators were not excused by either the international community or the Turkish opposition (publicly).¹⁴⁷

In the public sphere, Turkey's party elites from across the political spectrum spoke from within and on behalf of the normative environment of the coup taboo. Less than 24 hours after the failed coup, on July 16, the Grand National Assembly met in an emergency session, convened by Speaker of Parliament and İsmail Kahraman (AKP), represented by over 100 MPs represented by all four political parties (the governing AKP; CHP; MHP; and the Kurdish *Halkların Demokratik Partisi* [HDP]) in represented in the legislature condemned the abortive coup in a joint declaration.¹⁴⁸ The statement read, "We, the groups of four parties, strongly condemn the coup attempt against our mighty nation, the national will, the state, lawmakers, and parliament."¹⁴⁹

MPs spoke individually before the declaration was issued. AKP's Bekir Bozdağ pledged to hold the coup plotters accountable and "bring them to trial."¹⁵⁰ Özgür Özel, the leader of the parliamentary bloc of the main opposition party, the CHP, noted that his party has competed in Turkish elections over 90 years. "We may win at times and lose at other times," Özel said, "but we have never capitulated to military takeovers," a claim which, as mentioned above, is inaccurate.¹⁵¹ The CHP President, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, who reportedly has connections in the military, strongly denounced the attempted coup

¹⁴⁷ Sharan Grewal found evidence with a list experiment that the 24% of the Turkish opposition *privately* supported the coup operation. See Grewal 2018.

¹⁴⁸ Hurriyet 2016, 1-2.

¹⁴⁹ Hurriyet 2016, 17-18.

¹⁵⁰ TRT World Vision 2017, 6.

¹⁵¹ TRT World Vision 2017, 7.

d'état.¹⁵² Sezgin Tanrikulu (CHP) stated, "Now the priority for our country should be to eliminate this mentality of coup that still exists in the minds of some people in military and civilian institutions."¹⁵³ Senior official with MHP, Oktay Vural, "Coups or terrorist organisations or any other attempt to bring violence into the political arena is fundamentally rejected by our party."¹⁵⁴ Erkan Akçay (MHP) exclaimed that July 15 would "go down as a day of disgrace in the democratic history of Turkey."¹⁵⁵ Non-MP Chairman of the MHP, Devlet Bahçeli, tied the coup to anti-terror norms, claiming, "What happened last night was actually a terrorist attack."¹⁵⁶ This discourse quickly reached the masses, as group of Turks during the anti-coup demonstrations waved signs reading, "Hands off Turkey" and "We will *not bow down to terrorists*."¹⁵⁷ "No coup, either military or political, can have a legal ground," said the leader of the Kurdish HDP, Selahattin Demirtas.¹⁵⁸ His fellow HDP member İdris Baluken denounced the "coup mentality," and explicitly rejected the legitimacy of coups, stating, "military, bureaucratic and civil coup attempts cannot have a single legitimate reason."¹⁵⁹

Even though some members of the opposition would have preferred the coup to bring down President Erdoğan, these parties publicly demonstrated their "unity," which is a "rarity in a country famous for its tense political scene, and highly polarised cultural

¹⁵² Yeginsu 2016b, 2.

¹⁵³ As cited in Uras 2016, 7-8.

¹⁵⁴ As cited in Uras 2016, 10.

¹⁵⁵ TRT World Vision 2017, 8.

¹⁵⁶ As cited in Hurriyet 2016, 13.

¹⁵⁷ My emphases, Yeginsu 2016a, 4.

¹⁵⁸ As cited in Yeginsu 2016b, 4.

¹⁵⁹ As cited in Hurriyet 2016, 14.

and ideological lines.”¹⁶⁰ This unity is a prime example of a *regulative normative effect*, which, as mentioned, is typically associated with rational calculation. Given the existence of the taboo, the opposition had an incentive to simply condemn the taboo. The opposition did however use the opportunity to subtly voice their opposition to Erdoğan, tying the timing of the coup to the latter’s repression, mixing their support for “civilian government and democracy” with pressure on “the government and Erdogan to enhance Turkey’s democratic standards.”¹⁶¹

As we saw in Egypt, coup perpetrators have an incentive to refer to *successful* coups as revolutions. Where coups fail, even those who sympathize with or who actively supported the takeover (if they are not caught) will condemn coups. There is one prominent within-case temporal comparison from Turkey that supports this contention: the comparative reaction of Fethullah Gülen to the coup events in September 1980 and July 2016. We will set aside the debates about whether Gülen or his *Hizmet* (Service) movement was involved in the abortive coup.¹⁶² What is important is that Gülen did not merely deny involvement in the affair,¹⁶³ but condemned coups d’état as a practice, claiming he has “suffered under multiple military coups.”¹⁶⁴ His *denial of involvement* can easily be explained from a legal standpoint (avoiding extradition), but only the coup taboo can explain *his harsh and general condemnation* of coups.

¹⁶⁰ Uras 2016, 13.

¹⁶¹ Uras 2016, 14.

¹⁶² There seems to be agreement that *Hizmet* participated in the coup, but estimates vary on Gülen’s knowledge and involvement. See, e.g., Rettman 2017, 26; Waterfield 2017, 1-3; Sputnik 2017; Esen and Gumuscu 2017, 60.

¹⁶³ Pop and Walker 2016, 12.

¹⁶⁴ Agence-France Presse 2016, 4.

There are two reasons why the taboo better explains Gülen's utterances after the July coup. First, while carefully avoiding an explicit endorsement of "coups," Gülen has in his past supported military interventions. After Chief of the General Staff Kenan Evren's September 12, 1980 coup, however, Gülen expressed approval that the army had saved the nation. When a reporter with *BBC News* in 2016 asked about his support for the 1980 coup, Gülen deflected, choosing instead to differentiate *support for the army* and *support for coups*.¹⁶⁵ Second, Gülen has publicly expressed extremist opinions on Erdoğan and the AKP since their falling out in 2011.¹⁶⁶ He once compared the regime under the AKP to "Hitler's SS forces."¹⁶⁷ If publicly expressing support for coups was not especially shameful, then it would be reasonable to expect Gülen to deny his own involvement in the coup while expressing approval for the actions of the conspirators. Third, Gülen also tried to shift blame to others, by pointing to others "inside" the operation, particularly Kemalists and nationalists.¹⁶⁸ This is a subtle attempt to legitimize the coup attempt by pointing to broader support for the coup than only among Gülenists.

The international community's condemnation was swift and without equivocation, as in Egypt, and usually tied their anti-coup message to democratic norms. EU officials denounced the coup "and backed the country's democratic institutions and the rule of law."¹⁶⁹ The Italian Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni issued a statement of relief that this "military adventure that would have brought the country into chaos with

¹⁶⁵ BBC 2016.

¹⁶⁶ Esen and Gumuscu 2017, 71; Park 2014, 4.

¹⁶⁷ Saul 2016, 12-13

¹⁶⁸ BBC 2016.

¹⁶⁹ Pop and Walker 2016, 1.

the return of ghosts of the past.”¹⁷⁰ In her condemnation, German Chancellor Angela Merkel made statements in support of democratic institutions, and added that, “Tanks on the streets and air strikes against their own people are injustice.”¹⁷¹ In a stark contrast to his statement on Morsi’s ouster, US Secretary of State John Kerry said the US opposed any attempt to overthrow a democratically elected leader and change must come through a constitutional process.”¹⁷² The Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs lauded Turks “for defending their democracy *and civilian rule*.”¹⁷³

Statespersons in the Middle East also condemned the coup. In a rare moment of agreement, both Israeli officials and Hamas expressed support for the Turkish government against the coup plotters.¹⁷⁴ The Syrian opposition-in-exile sent a congratulatory note to the Turkish public for thwarting the coup, noting that they had saved their democracy rather than “let a group of putschists take it away in a desperate attempt to restore military rule.”¹⁷⁵ One Middle Eastern state, however, objected to this sweep of anti-coup norm inculcation: Egypt. When the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) attempted to denounce the coup, Cairo balked at the proposed declaration, which would have called on all sides in Turkey to “respect the democratically elected government of Turkey.”¹⁷⁶ Clearly sensitive to questions of the legality of Gen. Sisi’s actions in July 2013, Egyptian diplomats argued that the UNSC is “in no position to

¹⁷⁰ Associated Press 2016, 3.

¹⁷¹ As cited in Nienaber 2016, 5.

¹⁷² Associated Press 2016, 14.

¹⁷³ Associated Press 2016, 24.

¹⁷⁴ Associated Press 2016, 15-22, 24-27.

¹⁷⁵ Associated Press 2016, 28.

¹⁷⁶ Nichols 2016, 1.

qualify, or label that government—or *any other government* for that matter—as democratically elected or not.”¹⁷⁷ Referring back to the popular basis of *Tamarod*, they urged the Council to instead use “democratic and constitutional *principles* and the rule of law” in its statement.”¹⁷⁸

The *permissive effect* of the taboo associated with failed coups was immediately on display in July 2016. A harsh crackdown and abuse of the opposition was what German Chancellor Merkel had in mind when she urged President Erdoğan “to treat the arrested supporters of the attempted coup in line with the fundamental principles of the rule of law.”¹⁷⁹ The leader of the European Parliament’s Socialist bloc, Gianni Pitella, denounced the coup, but did not mince words in noting the bloc’s “severe judgment of President Erdogan, who is responsible for anti-democratic tendencies in Turkey against political opponents, freedom of the media and human rights.”¹⁸⁰ Erdoğan unsurprisingly met these concerns by swiftly blaming his chief political opponent, Gülen. The AKP leader claimed followers of Gülen were operating a “parallel state” that—drawing on the *constitutive* normative association of anti-coup and democratic norms—was trying to undermine a democratically elected government. The AKP-led government then began a widespread crack down, arresting 6,000 people in two days for “alleged” involvement in the coup.¹⁸¹ Reports of coerced confessions, torture, beatings, and rape soon followed.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁷ Nichols 2016, 5.

¹⁷⁸ Nichols 2016, 6.

¹⁷⁹ As cited in Nienaber 2016, 6.

¹⁸⁰ As cited in Pop and Walker 2016, 18.

¹⁸¹ Uras 2016, 11-12.

¹⁸² Amnesty International 2018.

Guns & Butter: Alternative Explanations

Guns: weapons versus ideas. Realists in International Relations (IR) theory and many CMR researchers often explicitly or implicitly argue that material sources of power are the more important than ideational sources of authority. While ideational factors, like legitimacy, are widely recognized in the study of civil-military relations, there nevertheless exists a general bias that soldiers, not civilians, ultimately decide when to enter and exit politics.¹⁸³ An excellent illustration of such thinking was written in the London *Times* in 1963 about coups in Iraq:

The armed forces are the sole dispensers of revolution nowadays, simply *because they have the arms*. Only a man with a gun can overthrow one who came to power with a gun.... [T]he civilian, although they are his affairs that are at stake, *has practically no voice at all*.¹⁸⁴

As in IR Realism's reading of Thucydides, the thinking in CMR scholarship tends to be that the armed "do what they can," and the unarmed "suffer what they must."¹⁸⁵ Material understandings of politics and international affairs cannot account for the coup taboo. Questions of material power cannot account for the fact that both *winners* and *losers* in coup events respect the taboo. That is, if measurable power were all that mattered, those who could successfully organize and employ violence against their opponents would not need to legitimate their actions. Their success would speak for itself.

As discussed, after seizing power in July 2013, General Sisi spent considerable time legitimating his coup with popular support and ensured it was referred to as a *revolution*. Internationally, the African Union's (AU) decision to suspend Egypt marked the first instance it had applied its anti-coup policy to one of its "big five," each of which

¹⁸³ See, e.g., Kinney 2018.

¹⁸⁴ The Times 1963, 3, emphasis added.

¹⁸⁵ Thucydides 5.89.

supply 15% of the AU budget, signifying that “all member states, regardless of their importance, are subject to the same rules and regulations,” even if some AU member-states were uncertain about the move.¹⁸⁶ Egyptian diplomats conveyed Cairo’s “dismay” that AU member-states “called for suspending them,” and Egypt heatedly censured those states that “treated the July 3 event as a coup.”¹⁸⁷ The AU made the decision to suspend Egypt for two key normative reasons: not doing so would (1) risk its legitimacy to enforce rules and (2) send a dangerous message to African conspirators that they could “encourage large-scale demonstrations as a pretext for ousting governments.”¹⁸⁸ Many observers criticized the AU’s decision to reinstate Egypt after General Sisi’s election in 2014—citing George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*: “all are equal but some are more equal than others”—but the AU suspended a powerful member, resisted its diplomatic efforts for a year, and reinstated Cairo on its own terms.

Many have argued that the failure of the Turkish coup can be attributed to the ideational power that permitted Erdoğan to send chanting supporters to confront tanks in the streets of Ankara and Istanbul. While this may be true, it does not help us assess the relative weight to assign material and ideational power because there are probably many factors that led to the coup’s demise. Only ideational power can explain the fact that after the coup had already failed, regime supporters and critics alike stood side-by-side in the Turkish parliament and chastised the coup perpetrators in a clear nod to the power of normative precedent. It is only further evidence for the power of social pressure that, if

¹⁸⁶ Dersso 2013, 2.

¹⁸⁷ Dersso 2013, 8.

¹⁸⁸ Dersso 2013, 3-4.

opposition party leaders did privately desire a successful coup, they stood next to their rivals and condemned it.

There are a number of puzzles of international affairs that only the taboo can solve. On the one hand, Russia's Foreign Ministry expressed concern about "the terrorist threats existing in the country and armed conflict in the region" that would pose a "risk to international and regional stability," so long as the situation in Turkey did not settle down.¹⁸⁹ On the other hand, that would not require the ministry to request that all sides in Turkey "respect the constitutional order."¹⁹⁰ As well, Russia would have had an interest in Erdoğan's ouster, even despite a thaw in relations between Ankara and Moscow since Turkish fighter jet downed a Russian warplane at the Turkish-Syrian border in November 2015.¹⁹¹ The AKP leader's ambitious foreign policy pitted Turkey against Russian ally Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.¹⁹² Indeed, there were widespread fears among Syrian refugee communities that if the AKP were ousted the new regime would normalize relations with Damascus and they would become victims of a crackdown as they had been after Morsi's ouster in Egypt.¹⁹³

Relations between Ankara and Tehran had improved in April 2016,¹⁹⁴ so this rapprochement (in the area of trade) could explain Iran's anti-coup sentiment. However, like Russia, Iran would have benefitted from a new leadership in Turkey that might have removed troops from its Syrian ally's northern territory and withdrawn support for Syrian

¹⁸⁹ Associated Press 2016, 10.

¹⁹⁰ Associated Press 2016, 10.

¹⁹¹ BBC News 2015; Associated Press 2016, 11.

¹⁹² Al Jazeera 2016, 14-20; Associated Press 2016, 29.

¹⁹³ Kingsley 2016.

¹⁹⁴ Al Jazeera 2016, 1-11.

rebels.¹⁹⁵ Yet the content of Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif’s anti-coup statement was not about regional affairs, but instead about the coup taboo and its association with democratic norms. Zarif praised the “brave defence by the people of Turkey of *their democracy and elected government*,” and added that the failed takeover demonstrates that the “*coup d’état has no place* and is doomed to fail in our region.”¹⁹⁶

Butter: make money, not coups. IR Liberals argue that states avoid conflict and instability because this disrupts the flow of aid, trade, and capital. Some theorists in CMR argue that post-coup governments “sell” their coups to domestic and international audiences out of fear that they will lose foreign aid and/or investment and frighten markets more generally.¹⁹⁷ This line of thinking does not challenge the power of the coup taboo. First, arguments that focus on aid, in particular, are typically implicitly or explicitly based on the existence of anti-coup norms. That is, aid is cutoff because coups transgress normative boundaries. In cases where aid is not withheld, like US aid to Egypt in July 2013, there is empirical evidence that donors and recipients make diplomatic and legal arguments why the event was not a violation of norms, i.e., not a coup.

Second, there is no reason to expect, a priori, that revolutionary upheaval would be more reassuring to international markets than a coup d’état. Thus it cannot explain why the post-coup Egyptian authorities legitimated their coup by calling it a revolution. One might argue, however, that markets prefer coups because they quickly alter power at the top, while talk of revolutionary change may be associated with large amounts of

¹⁹⁵ Al Jazeera 2016, 14-20; Associated Press 2016, 29.

¹⁹⁶ As cited in Associated Press 2016, 32, my emphasis.

¹⁹⁷ Grewal and Kureshi 2018.

social unrest and bottom-up alterations in power structures. Exactly for its desire to access Algeria's oil, gas, and arms markets in the wake of Abdelaziz Bouteflika's imminent downfall, Russia has been pushing for a "negotiated transition" to maintain the status quo instead of its perceived alternative: popular rebellion by the Algerian street.¹⁹⁸

The third reason why these arguments do not challenge the coup taboo is empirical. Massive capital outflows from Egypt began under and in direct opposition to Mohammad Morsi. After Morsi's removal Egyptian billionaire Naguib Sawiris pledged to invest billions in Egypt and claimed others will, too, "under a new government aware of the importance of the presence of investors."¹⁹⁹ For business interests in Egypt, a coup had many advantages, most importantly that they could "rely on Egyptian soldiers to secure corporate assets—a type of insurance no other state actor can provide."²⁰⁰ The Egyptian military leadership disrupted strikes; broke them with its own laborers; and, on March 23, 2011, criminalized them.²⁰¹

As for Turkey, Brussels and Ankara had before the coup been engaged in discussions about allowing Turks to travel visa-free in Europe—a demand which Erdoğan had made as a condition for assisting Europe reduce "irregular migration from the Middle East."²⁰² After the coup, observers argued that an Erdoğan crackdown would stall or reverse progress on these negotiations. "The EU insists that visa-free travel is only available to countries that meet a list of criteria," wrote Pop and Walker for the *Wall*

¹⁹⁸ Ramani 2019.

¹⁹⁹ Al Arabiya 2013, 5.

²⁰⁰ Marshall and Stacher 2012, 22.

²⁰¹ Kouddous 2013, 33.

²⁰² Pop and Walker 2016, 13.

Street Journal, “including on how the government treats critics.”²⁰³ Thus when Turkish parliamentarians convened to condemn the attempted coup d’état, they would not have had the visa negotiations on their mind. The EU was not concerned about the instability caused by the coup, but rather about Erdoğan’s treatment of regime critics. As discussed above, EU officials (especially the Socialist bloc) had been vehemently criticizing Erdoğan’s regime on that score well before the failed coup.

Conclusions & Implications

This article has presented evidence of the operation of a *coup taboo*—a normative injunction against military interventions—in the domestic politics of the Middle East as well as in the international system. The taboo regulates the behavior of social agents in coup environments, when public discourse becomes focused on the legitimacy of coups d’état. The constitutive effects of anti-coup norms, not surprisingly, categorize nations as undemocratic and brand coup perpetrators as international outlaws. Most importantly, the essay has demonstrated two different permissive effects of the taboo in the Middle East. After failed coups, the surviving regime can draw on anti-coup norms (much like norms against terrorism) to justify brutal crackdowns on the opposition. Successful coup perpetrators, so long as they are able to brand their coups as popular and/or revolutionary, can convince large segments of their publics and the international community that their power seizure does not constitute a coup and is therefore legitimate.

Nevertheless, the taboo raises costs of potential conspirators by ensuring that they will face social and political condemnation. Politicians and soldiers who contemplate

²⁰³ Pop and Walker 2016, 14.

coups must make an effort to retain their status as legitimate actors in their own political systems as well as in the community of states. The taboo offers a quick referent for those grappling with whether or not to classify an event as a coup d'état. Simply put, observers should be confident in their classification of coups even when conspirators claim their action was not coup-like. Attempts to convince the world that a military intervention is something else is due to a desire to bring transgressive behavior into normative alignment.

This presents an opportunity for practitioners of security sector reform and pro-democracy activists. Understanding the coup taboo can be used as a tool in the drive to inculcate norms of democratic civilian control. We might think of this as a “coup detection” technique, a vocabulary that can be used to quickly spot and call out coup perpetrators before they can legitimate armed intervention. It would also complicate and raise the costs for world leaders who wish to brush aside coups, such as how the United States used General Sisi's legitimizing discourse to accept his coup in July 2013. International legal scholars could adopt coup detection techniques to hold US administrations legally accountable for dancing around the classification of coups.

This article also contributes to theoretical debates in International Relations (IR) and civil-military relations (CMR). The taboo challenges materialist approaches because it makes sense of important social behavior that Realism and Liberal theory cannot. State actors are not merely concerned with security relationships with other states and material distributions of power in the international system. If that were true, IOs like the African Union would not have suspended Egypt after its coup and dozens of state officials across the world would not have issued anti-coup and pro-democracy statements in the wake of

the abortive coup in Turkey. This supports institutional Liberal theories, but questions theories about the reduction of violence/instability through trade, aid, and international markets, which in this case either rest on assumptions about the power of anti-coup norms (e.g., cutting off aid) or do not account for behaviors that arise in response to coups (e.g., increased investment).

Research in CMR generally recognizes the power of norms and legitimacy, but also tends to privilege material power in studies of coups and military extrication. This essay has shown that focusing on the possession of weapons and the ability to employ violence obscures the fact that even successful coup conspirators make an effort to legitimate their behavior to domestic and international audiences. While this confirms existing research on norms and legitimacy in the study of CMR, it dives deeper than existing scholarship and as a result clarifies and strengthens the theoretical mechanisms that undergird those research agendas. Moreover, the analysis presented in this essay demonstrates patterns that can be used to develop expectations about social behavior in response to particular coup environments (e.g., successful/unsuccessful).

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