

# Respect for Human Rights as a Predictor of Arab Spring Intensity

## A Replication and Extension Study

Matthew D Hudson-Flege, Clemson University, Clemson, USA

### ABSTRACT

The popular uprisings of the Arab Spring have had a profound impact in the Arab World and beyond, and numerous researchers and commentators have explored the causes of these events. The present study sought to build upon an empirical exploration of political, economic, and social predictive factors of Arab Spring intensity by incorporating measures of countries' respect for human rights. Ordinal regression analyses found that countries' scores on the Cingranelli-Richards (CIRI) Physical Integrity Rights Index in 2010 significantly predicted levels of unrest experienced during the Arab Spring, such that countries who demonstrated less respect for physical integrity human rights experienced higher levels of unrest during the Arab Spring. The implications for future research and policy are discussed.

### KEYWORDS

Activism, Arab Spring, Human Rights, Physical Integrity Rights

## INTRODUCTION

The series of protests and popular uprisings throughout the Arab world beginning in 2011, known collectively as the Arab Spring, have drastically altered political and social realities in the Middle East and North Africa region and beyond. While the level of unrest varied greatly between countries, ranging from minor protests, to major demonstrations, to regime change or on-going civil-war, every predominately Arab country was affected in some way. And while the long-term outcomes of the Arab Spring remain uncertain for many countries, scholars, policymakers, activists, and the popular media have focused much attention on what caused the Arab Spring, and what factors contributed to the varying levels of unrest. Little empirical research has been conducted on predictive factors of Arab Spring intensity, however. A notable exception is Byun and Hollander's (2015) article "Explaining the Intensity of the Arab Spring," published in the *Digest of Middle East Studies*, which examined whether a number of political, social, and economic factors were significant predictors of the level of unrest experienced by countries in the Arab Spring. Ultimately, the authors' ordinal regression analyses revealed that only corruption was a significant predictor of Arab Spring intensity.

Absent from Byun and Hollander's (2015) analysis, however, was inclusion of any measures of countries' respect for human rights as possible predictors of Arab Spring intensity. The present study sought to build upon Byun and Hollander's (2015) analysis and extend the literature by examining whether countries' respect for human rights, or lack thereof, significantly predicted their level of unrest experienced during the Arab Spring.

### Categorizing Levels of Arab Spring Unrest

In order to examine whether respect for human rights was associated with varying levels of Arab Spring intensity, it is first necessary to categorize the levels of unrest experienced by each country. Byun and Hollander (2015) proposed four categories of Arab Spring unrest: minor, isolated protests (Mauritania, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates); major demonstrations (Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Morocco); militarized, civil insurrection (Bahrain and Syria); and regime overthrown (Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen). The authors further collapsed the categories by combining "regime overthrown" and "militarized, civil insurrection" into a broader category of "regime threatened or removed," because differences between countries in these categories may be more of a reflection of the presence of external interventions or the strength of an individual regime than a measure of the actual level of unrest experienced by the country. For example, had NATO forces not provided early military support to rebels in Libya, or had other countries actually provided support to the Gaddafi regime, it is plausible that Libya could have been mired in a long-term civil war much like Syria. In any case, all of the countries in the "regime threatened or removed" category faced significant, widespread, organized civil unrest threatening or overthrowing the ruling regime.

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