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Co-optation as a Strategy of Authoritarian Legitimation

Success and Failure in the Arab World

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1. Introduction¹

Region wide protests and the toppling of the two authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt are among the most important developments the Arab world has witnessed in a long time. More importantly, legitimacy is at the heart of these events, as could be seen in various demonstrations in Egypt and Syria that revolved around the ruler's or regime's illegitimacy. The protests of spring 2011 are one specific point in time which caused (or showed) a crisis of legitimacy in most Arab states.² When authoritarian rule as such is challenged directly by the people, it is important to renew or restore legitimacy in order to maintain overall regime stability. But in authoritarian regimes, legitimation does not function through institutions or procedures of democratic decision-making (Habermas 1973). This is why co-optation is a mechanism that is commonly employed in this regime type: it commonly substitutes for democratic participation by ensuring the inclusion of strategically important parts of the population into politics. Inclusion is crucial because it contributes to stability. The main function of co-optation is the silencing of dissent by giving certain individuals or groups a stake in the status quo.

Instead of focusing on a single issue area or type of co-optation, this paper takes a broader approach. It is enlightening for our understanding of legitimation and co-optation to evaluate in which of all possible areas what strategies are employed. This broad approach also might enable us to find out which areas and strategies actually seem to be most important, as otherwise it is difficult to assess the relative importance of different factors in this field of study.

This paper offers a theoretical chapter on the relationship between different concepts relevant to the study of co-optation. From a conceptual perspective, co-optation is embedded into a larger framework of legitimation under conditions of autocracy. Already before the Arab spring, the "search for non-democratic legitimacy" was singled out as an avenue of post-democratization research on the Middle East (Valbjørn and Bank 2010: 196). After an attempt at offering some elements of measurement, the concept presented will be tentatively applied to the current situation in Jordan in a case study. In the following, a brief illustrative comparison to revolutionary cases in the Arab world will give an impression to what extent these empirical findings are representative of general trends of co-optation in the Arab world. Finally, the usefulness of the approach to co-optation will be reviewed and some general observations on the concept made.

¹ I would like to thank Torsten Matzke and Jörg Haas for fruitful discussions as well as helpful comments on this draft paper.

² Definitions of legitimacy abound. Whereas in the philosophical tradition of normative science, legitimacy is an ideal and objective state that is almost impossible to reach, for purpose of social science we adopt an empirical definition that is context-sensitive rather than universal.

2. Conceptualizing Co-optation

As is so often the case in political science, co-optation is a concept that is widely used, although hardly ever defined. Until the post-democratization strand of literature became fashionable, non-repressive modes of maintaining stability under conditions of authoritarian rule were especially under-researched. The description of this panel puts forward a definition of co-optation as “the capacity of the ruling elite to bind strategic actors to the regime.” Further elements of a definition are the use of both “informal (e.g. patrimonial rule) and formal (e.g. parties) mechanisms” by which “strategic actors (or groups of actors) within or outside the political elite [are tied] to the regime elite.” (Gerschewski 2010: 8; 13) As the objects of co-optation are both already existing members of the elite as well as new individuals or groups who are tied to the regime, this effectively means both the strengthening and widening of its base (unless simultaneously other parts of the elites or social base are neglected or even sacrificed). As from a regime perspective these two possibilities touch upon different aspects, it makes sense to analytically distinguish between them by construing two subtypes of co-optation according to the “target group” of such strategies. Regarding the strengthening and widening of the regime base, it can be hypothesized that the former subtype of co-optation is more sustainable than the latter due to the stabilization of expectations from either side. On the other hand, a widening of the base might be considered equally important or even bearing more potential for overall stability. But then again, it is more dangerous to lose already existing supporters than to miss a chance to gain new ones. The continuous co-optation of the regime base proper therefore always has to be a priority in authoritarian politics.

So far, it is obvious what the rationale on the part of regime elites is for engaging in co-optation. But why would somebody like to be co-opted? The most important reason might be the access to resources in the broadest sense of the word. It means raising the social capital (and most often pecuniary capital as well) of the individual or groups co-opted, along with some degree of influence and even decision-making power.

2.1. The relationship between stability, legitimacy, legitimation, and co-optation

Different authors have come up with various conceptualizations of the nature of co-optation. In its broadest sense, it can be described as a non-repressive mode of securing power and thus contributing to regime stability. However, the question as to whether co-optation itself is part of legitimation or a third element besides legitimacy and repression is answered differently by different scholars. But first of all, a definition of some further terms is needed. While *legitimacy* shall be understood here in a Weberian sense as the citizens’ acceptance of the incum-

bents' claim to rule, efforts by regime members to attain legitimacy directed towards different addressees, be they individuals, groups, or the whole population, are called *legitimation*. Stability can be defined as the probability that a regime will not experience breakdown.³

As mentioned before, Johannes Gerschewski distinguishes between co-optation through formal and co-optation through informal institutions as one of three pillars that account for the stability of autocracies (2010: 13f.). Both legitimacy and repression are viewed as being distinct from co-optation. Christian von Haldenwang also considers co-optation not to be a part of legitimation, but as a mechanism that relieves the regime of stress in that it canalizes legitimation demands by the population and keeps them in check (1999: 376).⁴

Ex negativo, co-optation is seen as a part of legitimacy by authors such as Oliver Schlumberger in contrast to repression (Schlumberger 2004: 8).⁵ André Bank (2004) also finds co-optation to be a pattern of legitimation in Arab states within his category of the politics of participation and inclusion.⁶ Why do scholarly assessments of the nature of co-optation differ although there definitively seems to be a relation between the concepts discussed?

One decisive reason for this separation of co-optation from legitimation seems to lie in the distinction between the different addressees of these mechanisms. Legitimacy is often understood as a category that refers to society as a whole and legitimation is thus a broadly targeted pattern of rule, whereas co-optation primarily focuses on certain strategically important groups or individuals. The general impression one might get from the way the term is used in research is that legitimation is rather content-based, while co-optation is focused on persons. But as for legitimation, the individual citizen and his belief or behavior are central, the reason why certain people are co-opted in the first place might also lie beyond purely personal considerations – which is why one speaks of strategically important groups.

What both mechanisms do have in common is their non-repressive nature and the effect of appeasing the addressees and removing opposition or resistance to the regime, be it by creating loyalty and acceptance, even collaboration, or just eliminating issues that might generate dissatisfaction. The difference between these two patterns becomes less significant when taking into account that many strategies of legitimation are not directed towards the commonalty, but also only towards certain groups within the population, such as parts of the regime base or

³ I owe this suggestion of a definition to my colleague Torsten Matzke at Tübingen.

⁴ Other stress-reducing strategies according to Haldenwang include repressive exclusion and catering to particular interests by means of clientelism (ibid.).

⁵ For Albrecht and Schlumberger, co-optation is one of five strategies of legitimation as opposed to repression. The existence of parliaments, nonprofit organizations, loyal opposition parties all form part of co-optation. However, by evaluating the control over society by using pseudo-NGOs as “soft repression”, categories (the non-repressive nature of co-optation) become blurred again (Albrecht and Schlumberger 2004: 383).

⁶ He analytically separates this category from two other categories, rent-seeking and allocation on the one hand and symbol politics on the other.

the elites (Bank 2004). The boundaries between “common legitimation” and “specific co-optation” strategies are thus less clear in practice than it may seem at first sight. Again, both strategies can be summed up as non-repressive mechanisms of maintaining power, and both equal inclusion for a certain group of people, often at the expense of others.

To put it even more clearly, legitimation is a strategy that seeks an individual’s acceptance of rule. Co-optation is a strategy that also seeks an individual’s acceptance of rule and offers an incentive to ensure that this end is realized. As legitimation is the more general concept, it follows from the elaboration above that co-optation can be framed as a subset of legitimation strategies. When we adopt a definition that takes into account the different addressees of legitimation strategies, co-optation is one of various ways to attain a higher degree of legitimacy, even if only with the groups or individuals co-opted – but it is the job of incumbent elites to choose the objects of co-optation wisely enough to ensure regime stability.

This paper conceptualizes co-optation as one *mode* of legitimation. Mode means the form or shape that legitimation strategies can assume, irrespective of their content (Schlumberger 2010: 239). The other modes include (a) a legal-formal mode, which refers to institutionalized regulations, including both formal and informal institutions. (b) The second mode deals with the level of discourse and symbol politics, whereas (c) the third mode describes the actual material policies of a regime and might be also called output or performance mode. (d) Co-optation is the last mode as defined above in section 2. In order to achieve legitimacy, various modes might be employed at a time to attain this result. Therefore, overlaps between different modes will be the rule rather than the exception.

2.2. The relationship between neo-patrimonialism, clientelism, and co-optation

The elaborations above refer to co-optation in general and are thus applicable to all authoritarian regimes – and maybe even beyond. When studying co-optation in the Arab world, it makes sense to briefly have a look at the regime type that dominates in this region, which is neo-patrimonialism, and relate it to the framework presented.

Basically, there are two approaches to scrutinizing the relationship between co-optation and patrimonialism as patterns of rule. The link between both concepts can be seen in the importance of personal ties and informal structures. Within her framework for studying neo-patrimonialism in the Arab world, Helga Baumgarten regards “cooptation as the central institution in the state” (2002: 67). Quite to the contrary Johannes Gerschewski grasps patrimonialism as a constitutive element of co-optation (2010: 13). However, as patrimonialism denotes a type of political rule and is thus situated on a superordinate level of abstraction, the

structures he refers to can better be conceptualized on a lower analytical level as clientelism, defined as “long-term reciprocal dyadic exchange relations between asymmetrically positioned actors” (Karadag 2007: 244, author’s translation).

The relationship of neo-patrimonialism with co-optation can be visualized with the help of the concentric circles that first appeared in Bill and Leiden’s work on patrimonialism (1974) and were then further developed by Peter Pawelka (1985). The positional method for describing elites in a neo-patrimonial regime shows the ruler in the center of the circles, surrounded by his core elite and the top elite in a further circle. The outside circle contains the sub-elite (Perthes 2004). Co-optation then means mainly that individuals are drawn into the sub-elite circle or from the sub-elite to a circle even closer to the ruler. On a group level, it is equal to a strengthening or avoiding the breaking away of the respective elite segment.

Clientelism comes into the picture as the prevalent social pattern, which means that co-optation not only affects the person directly targeted, but also may fulfill its function with the co-opted person’s own clients. However, clientelism cannot be seen as being equivalent to co-optation as the former denotes a general pattern of social organization (patron-client relations), while the latter is a strategy of political rule – even though all political actors are also embedded into a societal context and adhere to the prevalent patterns of interaction. But as clientelism widens the scope of co-optation, it further enhances its effectiveness.

2.3. Disaggregating different forms of co-optation

As strategies can not only succeed, but also fail, it seems surprising that research often does not include the actual outcomes but stops at the description of legitimation strategies. It makes more sense to disaggregate co-optation strategies into the different realms in which they are employed and assess their success or failure rather than to denote a regime as a whole as co-optative. Only when co-optation is found to be the dominant mechanism of rule maintenance in various areas *and* actually works does it make any sense to characterize the regime as co-optative.

Co-optation is a term on a medium level of abstraction: it is narrower than legitimation, but does not denote the specific way it is done. On an even lower level of abstraction, what are the actual working mechanisms of co-optation? The different possibilities of co-opting, i.e. by inclusion in formal institution, funding, by informal inclusion, by patronage, by discriminating policies, etc. all point at various ways of how to do it, but they do not explain why one mechanism is preferred over another to reach the same goal.

When we take a step back again and look at the overarching concept of legitimation, this paper argues that all strategies of legitimation can be structured according to underlying types of legitimacy. The presence of these various sources or areas of legitimacy in a specific political context pre-structure the possibilities for garnering legitimacy. This paper therefore differentiates between various strategies of co-optation corresponding to an underlying type of legitimacy. The types of legitimacy chosen for this framework are derived from a Weberian notion of legitimacy in his empirical-analytical tradition, supplemented by other forms of legitimacy that are typical for the Arab world (Schlumberger 2010: 237 ff).⁷

First of all, **structural legitimacy** denotes what Weber might call rational legitimacy, albeit in a modified sense that more aptly grasps its function in authoritarian regimes. Structural legitimacy refers to the setup of the polity including formal institutions reminiscent of democracies such as parliaments, elections, and other “imitative institutions” (Albrecht and Schlumberger 2004). As to the mode of symbol politics, talking about democracy in the public sphere and referring to the political system as a democracy in discourse are strategies that foster this type of legitimacy. On the *co-optation side of structural legitimacy*, one common possibility for legitimation is the widening of political participation, both in the sense of granting citizens a greater say in politics and of including hitherto underprivileged groups into decision-making structures. Another important element is the co-optation of the opposition.⁸

Traditional legitimacy is directly inspired by Weber’s ideal type that refers to “the sanctity of age-old rules powers” (Weber 1947), even though “the invention of tradition” has become a common phenomenon. The traditional type of legitimacy is institutionalized by succession regulations or even the constitutionally codified sanctity of the king’s person. On the level of symbol politics, rituals are the most important strategy of legitimation. As to *co-optation*, traditional leaders or protagonists of traditional forces are at the center of attention.

Legitimation strategies that concern the construction of citizens’ identities, the result of which is thus just called **identity-related legitimacy**, take different shapes in different context. There are two important subtypes; one refers to nationalism, the other to religion. For purpos-

⁷ The terminology of the categories goes back to Easton (1965: 286-310), who distinguishes between personal and structural legitimacy, although filled with a different and sometimes more specific content, along with Weber’s traditional legitimacy. Easton’s ideological legitimacy is transformed into identity-related legitimacy here, and material legitimacy is brought in as it has always loomed large in the Arab world (Pawelka 1985: 24).

⁸ The overlap with the legal regulation mode becomes clear when considering that both strategies are implemented by using or introducing elections, parliaments, and other formal and informal institutions.

es of garnering identity-related legitimacy in a nationalist vein, symbol politics are of utmost importance, e.g. by creating a narrative around an “imagined community”. A probable *co-optation strategy for nationalist purposes* would be the co-optation of groups or individuals with a nationalist ideology or agenda. Minority politics might play a role here. In the religious sector, on the legal level regulations that are in accordance with religious law are one possibility. On the discourse level, state officials may adopt religious arguments for legitimating their policies or display their personal piety. As to *co-optation in the domain of religion*, binding religious leaders to the regime is a standard strategy. Apart from this religion politics in the strict sense of the word, even ideological currents that are incompatible with the officially promoted interpretation of religion might be co-opted by adopting a *laissez-faire* approach.

In the realm of **material legitimacy**, two seemingly contradictory trajectories can guide regime policies. The first one follows the tradition of collectivist ideologies such as the so-called Arab socialism that dominated the region for many decades during the 20th century. For Albrecht and Schlumberger, co-optation is the “‘social pact’ between the ruler and the ruled” which “was mainly based on the distribution of wealth” (2004: 382).⁹ Material allocation can be regarded as a means of large-scale or *mass co-optation* (cf. the contribution by Lucas and Richter in this panel) in the sense of silencing criticism in the logical tradition of “no taxation, no representation”. On a more limited scope, the co-optation of e.g. trade unionists or leaders of professional associations plays a role.

After the introduction of neo-liberal market reforms to the Arab world, other policies that aimed at economic growth came to the fore. Selective reforms did not benefit the whole populations, but resulted in wealth for few. The *co-optation of businessmen* from the private sector into governments has been a significant development in most countries.

Personal legitimacy refers to the leader’s personal quality. This category is derived from Easton (1965) and also bears some traces of Weber’s charismatic legitimacy (Weber 1947). It is based upon the credibility and personal ability of the ruler which is the starting point for the *co-optation of individuals*. One important element here is to portray a ruler as a reformer etc. Table 1 summarizes the different types and modes of legitimation, specifying possible targets of co-optation within its specific mode for each type.

⁹ They see two types of co-optation, this rather allocative nature as well as inclusionary co-optation “with the aim of either widening a regime’s power base or directly controlling society” (Albrecht and Schlumberger 2004: 383).

Table 1: Possible targets of co-optation according to types of legitimacy

Type	mode subtype/ content	legal regula- tions, formal and informal institutions	discourse symbol politics	material ac- tion, policy, output, per- formance	co-optation
structural					co-optation of opposition
traditional					co-optation of traditional leaders
identity- related	nationalism				co-optation of nationalists
	religion				co-optation of religious leaders
material	collectivist ideology				“mass co- optation”
	neo-liberal moderniza- tion ideology				co-optation of businessmen
personal					co-optation of influential indi- viduals

Applying this framework helps us to find out about various measures of co-optation while taking the political context into consideration. The results are expected to differ according to the nature of the crisis at a specific point in time. On the one hand, this means that a legitimacy crisis that affects a specific type of legitimation leads to an intensification of strategies within either the same type or, in case that is impossible, in a different type for the sake of compensation.

Differences in the working mechanisms of co-optation might impact on stability in different ways. In order to assess which strategies have a more or less permanent effect and are more or less likely to be affected by a crisis, a comparative design would be necessary. However, this is hardly feasible when the crisis or crises during the time period studied do not affect all types of legitimacy equally (and such a crisis is hardly imaginable).

2.4. Measurement and case selection

For the measurement of successful co-optation, this paper takes a strictly qualitative approach in looking at the groups or individuals co-opted. As said before, they are given a stake in the status quo, which decreases the probability that they will voice dissent or act against the regime. *Successful co-optation* can be measured by observing a shift in behavior by the group or person targeted by the strategy towards more pro-regime actions and discourse. Particularly the acceptance of official posts is a visible sign of co-optation. When statements are available,

one can ask in the case of people displaying an antagonistic stance towards the regime whether they moved to a more compliant one. Did people shift from a silent stance to openly supporting the regime?¹⁰ The notion of support of course leads us back to Easton's definition of legitimacy as diffuse support, albeit in a more public or visible sense (Easton 1975: 450ff.). The question of sustainability of this new attitude needs also to be addressed. In order for co-optation to be deemed successful, it is assumed as working until open opposition against the ruling elites is voiced. *Failed co-optation* means that although a strategy of co-optation was implemented by ruling elites, a person does not give up on his or her oppositional or dissenting viewpoint, or continues to voice this openly. Moreover, when the change in behavior intended by co-optation initially seems to be successful, but is not sustained for more than a few weeks or months, one should also speak of failure.

Measurement in a strict methodological sense is almost impossible as it would require the identification of all potential targets of co-optation beforehand, then finding out whom elites actually tried to co-opt, and finally assessing a change in the behavior of co-opted persons or groups after the measure has been put in place.

One reason for choosing *Jordan* as a case study is that it has been an object of research as a prime example for a diversified pool of legitimation strategies (Schlumberger and Bank 2002; Bank 2004). It was also described as one of the co-optative regimes in the Arab world (Pawelka 2002: 433). The time span chosen for the study is the first half of 2011 from the beginning of local protests in January through July. For the sake of feasibility, the empirical instances of co-optation are construed *ex post* in this paper, instead of following the ideal typical research process described above. Sometimes, the evidence for the success or failure of co-optation strategies may seem rather impressionistic, but I have tried to pick the issues that were covered extensively in the semi-official press as an indicator for relative importance in order to establish a tentative assessment at least. In the case of Jordan, a further methodological challenge lies in the fact that the ceiling of free expression was pushed slowly as protests gained momentum.¹¹ It is thus not hard to compare statements made before and during or after the Arab spring and find that people now tend to speak more openly against the regime. Although that makes it harder to compare critical statements at different points in time, it still serves as a good indicator for the failure of co-optation, which would have been much more problematic to observe under more restrictive circumstances.

¹⁰ However, one difficulty here is to distinguish co-optation in the sense of the widening of the regime base from mobilization, as this last indicator would give evidence of both.

¹¹ Personal interview with journalist, April 2011, Amman.

3. Co-optation in Jordan

3.1. Structural co-optation in Jordan

The threat that the Arab spring posed to authoritarianism in the Arab world did not shake the foundations of political rule in Jordan as it did elsewhere. Instead of demanding the downfall of the regime, protesters “only” called for political reforms that would ensure greater representativeness of parliament and the election of the prime minister by a parliamentary majority (as opposed to his appointment by the king). Demands went as far as to suggesting constitutional changes that would transform Jordan into a constitutional monarchy and strip King Abdullah II of some of his extensive powers. Moreover, the role of the pervasive security services in political and everyday life was discussed openly. In short, a lot of red lines were crossed. The king responded to the challenge of facing protests with demands increasing almost each week by using old tactics. The single most important element was the establishment of a National Dialogue Committee (NDC). The NDC’s task consisted in formulating drafts for a new elections law and a political parties law as these two areas seemed crucial for tackling potential allegations of illegitimacy.¹² Furthermore, the members fought for the right to formulate general principles for political reform that might be used for constitutional changes.¹³ 53 individuals from different backgrounds were chosen to participate in the committee, the establishment of which was ordered by the prime minister. The personalities picked were mostly politicians and officials, but also included representatives of syndicates and other unions as well as journalists. Some Islamists’ names from the only well-organized political party in Jordan, the Islamic Action Front (IAF) were also listed, but they never showed up at the meetings.¹⁴

The creation of the NDC was an attempt at co-opting influential individuals who were not yet part of the regime. The ‘reformist bloc’ of fifteen “new faces” was enthusiastic at first because of the potential possibility of real change that the regional window of opportunity opened, although their mandate was limited and the creation of the committee itself was criticized. However, when it came to the actual formulation of recommendations for the legal modifications, the initial dynamic was stopped by the overwhelming majority of regime elites in all subcommittees. Furthermore, in order to prevent any substantial and far-reaching recommendations, another committee was established, this time by a royal decree. This commit-

¹² Survey results show that both parliaments and political parties rank among the least trusted institutions in Jordan (Arab Barometer 2005). Furthermore, after the IAF had boycotted the November 2010 national elections, representativeness of parliament was even worse than it would have been in case of their participation (Lust and Hourani 2011).

¹³ Personal interview with a member of the NDC, April 2011, Amman.

¹⁴ Personal interview with high-ranking IAF member, April 2011, Amman.

tee's task was to deal with the NDC's recommendations and to draft the actual laws to be submitted to parliament. This dispensable committee's creation buried the last hopes of NDC members about any tangible outcome of their work.

The "committeisation" (Bank 2004: 170), meaning the referral of all reform issues to committees under the auspices of the regime, was not only used for co-optation, but also meant a delegitimization of protesters who voiced their demands on the street instead of participating in "constructive dialogue". In the same vein, officials condemned demonstrations that were held in places where they would "disrupt normal life", as the dominant discourse put it.¹⁵ An opinion poll conducted in May 2011 shows that a majority of the population actually bought the latter argument rather than consider dialogue to be the only viable way for reform (CSS 2011b).¹⁶ Although this discourse itself has nothing to do with co-optation in the sense studied here, it shows that the concept of dialogue was not really accepted among the public.

The failed co-optation of the Islamists was another big issue in Jordan. In January 2011, protesters in Jordan demanded the downfall of the newly formed government of Samir Rifa'i, who was considered too neo-liberal and detached from average Jordanians. Regime members began talks with the IAF and offered them a ministerial post, for the first time during the reign of King Abdullah II. Obviously, the IAF refused in order to continue claiming that the government is not representative of the Jordanian people (which it still would not have been even with one IAF member among some thirty other ministers). The IAF preferred not to be a part of the government they perceived as illegitimate over co-optation and a higher degree of recognition. In this case, the failure of co-optation poses a problem to the regime as it put the IAF in a very comfortable and credible position. On the other hand, the Islamists never challenge the legitimacy of the king, and they demand reform of the regime instead of a change of regime.¹⁷ In that sense, the problem could be contained. But both major attempts at widening the regime base by structural co-optation have failed so far.

3.2. Traditional co-optation in Jordan

The feature that distinguishes Jordanian politics most from others is that the head of state, King Abdullah II, belongs to the family of the Hashemites, the Arabian tribe of the prophet Muhammad. His noble inheritance makes him the uncontested leader in a society shaped by a diversity of tribes and the cleavage between citizens of Transjordanian and of Palestinian ori-

¹⁵ The Jordan Times, 28 March 2011

¹⁶ 55% of the representative sample say they oppose demonstrations because they lead to chaos, whereas only 8% bring forward the argument that dialogue is the right way to tackle these problems. However, the percentage of supporters for this argument is as high as 24% among opinion leaders asked (CSS 2011b).

¹⁷ Personal interview with high-ranking IAF member, April 2011, Amman.

gins, and he is therefore superior to all citizens. Another advantage is that a king is harder to challenge than a president who occasionally has to stand in elections, rigged as they may be. The Hashemite monarchy can traditionally rely on their tribal base in the country's southern desert and northern hilly areas.¹⁸

In early 2011, not the king directly, but a person rather close to him became the focal point of tribal dissatisfaction. Some tribal figures (36 to be precise, only one of whom had been heard of before¹⁹) wrote a letter to the king complaining about the queen.²⁰ In a hardly disguised Anti-Palestinian tone, allegations of corruption were made against her family (which is of Palestinian descent). This letter could be read as the fear of the traditional regime base to be disadvantaged. During the months that followed, the king did everything to prove this fear unfounded. King Abdullah toured the entire country during the spring of 2011 in a massive campaign to have his pledge of allegiance (*wila'*) from the different tribes and cities renewed and allocate funds to the various regions.

He also made use of an allocation tool called *makrama*, a royal favor, which was mainly directed towards the military and veterans.²¹ These measures were also a response to grievances the veterans had voiced already in 2010 which were strikingly similar to those in the tribal letter (David 2010). The *makrama* is distinct from ordinary measures of allocation as it has the connotation of a gift granted by a traditional leader. This strengthening of the regime base seemed to be successful as the only protests that accompanied the king's tour were not directed against the tradition as such, but involved a group of youths who wanted to hand over a list of their demands to the king. These all revolved around allocation measures and were a classical example of tribal rent-seeking intending to get a larger piece of the cake and thus rather prove the functioning of this co-optation measure.

3.3. Identity-related co-optation in Jordan

In the area of the nationalist subtype of identity-related politics, no co-optation strategy can be observed during the relevant time span. Quite to the contrary, the direction taken seemed to be a classical *divide et impera* strategy between citizens of Transjordanian origin and those with Palestinian ancestors, who form the disadvantaged majority of the population. The sectarian card was obviously played by regime thugs who called all protestors of the Jordanian youth

¹⁸ For the role of tribalism in Jordan for legitimacy in general, cf. Al Oudat and Alshboul (2010).

¹⁹ Personal interview with political analyst, April 2011, Amman.

²⁰ In secret, she was even compared to other Arab first ladies notorious for their lavish lifestyle (personal interview with political analyst, March 2011, Amman).

²¹ E.g., the establishment of a "Royal University for Medical Sciences" affiliated with the Royal Medical Services and of a "Military Credit Fund" under a *makrama* should favor members of the security apparatus (The Jordan Times, 1 February 2011).

movement, whom they physically attacked during their sit-in on March 25, Palestinians – which was meant as an insult. Other labels, which the prime minister simultaneously used, included Islamists²² and even Salafists, thus provoking latent resentments among the broader population against both pro-reform activists and Palestinians at the same time.²³ The other side, who proclaimed themselves “loyalists”, were instrumentalized to induce a wave of nationalism which was supposed to raise doubts about all pro-reform demonstrators’ loyalty to the nation. The area of nationalist identity-building was thus characterized by a strategy of division and mobilization instead of co-optation.

In the realm of identity-related legitimation with a focus on religion, the changes observed were of little significance. In an attempt to appease radical Islamists, a ridiculous lawsuit in absentia was allowed to be staged against the Dane Kurt Westergaard and others who were blamed for the 2006 cartoon crisis with the charge of “defaming prophets, publishing cartoons insulting and slandering Muslims and inciting sectarianism and racism”.²⁴

This was in line with portraying Salafists as a danger, who, in early 2011, suddenly were allowed to appear in public after having kept low profile for years, demanding the release of jihadist prisoners.

When regime thugs attacked a peaceful demonstration by Salafists on April 15 in the town of Zarqa under the eyes of (highly untypical!) unarmed gendarmerie, scores of protesters and security personnel were left injured. But this time, even the minister of interior took the blame of traditional Salafists, who usually adopt a quietist stance (and are funded by government money²⁵), instead accusing jihadists of “terrifying people”, well aware of the fact that many people do not make this differentiation.²⁶ On their part, Salafists did not take the chance to complain about the role of the security apparatus in this violent incident. Instead, representatives of “mainstream Salafists” visited injured members of the gendarmerie in hospital, thus de facto accepting the official discourse.²⁷ So the regime managed to send at the same time a violent and a conciliatory message to Salafists, while they chose to remain non-oppositional.

²² The Jordan Times, 27 March 2011

²³ Naseem Tarawnah, “The March 25 Aftermath And Bridging Jordan’s Social Divide”, online: <http://www.black-iris.com/2011/03/29/the-march-25-aftermath-and-bridging-jordans-social-divide/>

²⁴ The Jordan Times, 18 April 2011, see also The Copenhagen Post Online, 16 May 2011:

<http://www.cphpost.dk/news/international/51637-jordan-trial-against-cartoonist-is-political.html>

²⁵ Workshop with political analyst, April 2011, Amman.

²⁶ The Jordan Times, 26 April 2011

²⁷ The Jordan Times, 18 April 2011

3.4. Material co-optation in Jordan

A lack of material legitimacy was one of the most important reasons for protests in Jordan. Economic grievances were the initial demands that brought people out on the streets.²⁸ The protests hit off in a small town where day laborers were demonstrating for better work conditions. They protested against a hike in prices, unemployment and corruption. The government responded to this with the standard strategy of raising the salaries of public servants and keeping subsidies in spite of a tight state budget and rising external debts.²⁹ This kind of *mass co-optation* was effective as protests began to run out of steam after a few months.³⁰

Meanwhile, the different professional associations, which have always had a high degree of organization in Jordan, began staging strikes and sit-ins one after the other. Their demands were substantial increases in salaries and other gratifications, and professionals working in the public sector demanded to be paid as much as employees in the private sector. Mostly, the demands of protesters were partially met and thus protests could be ended quite quickly. Here, the success can only be evaluated some time after the increased salaries turned out to be sufficient. However, the public sector restructuring that entails improving the salaries of some 200,000 employees comes with the reduction of overpaid employees at so-called “independent public institutions”. The fact that of the 8,000 employees affected by the original restructuring plan only 6,000 were talked of after a month shows their successful lobbying – the regime obviously decided to continue the co-optation of its base.³¹

Concerning the previously dominant pattern of material legitimation based on a *neo-liberal modernization ideology*, it has faded to the background. Rotating the prime minister out of office in response to popular pressure, one of the king’s first measures comes close to the opposite of co-optation. The subventions etc. described above came at the price of sacrificing some of the previously co-opted individuals. However, there were no larger structural changes to the set-up of the elite so that the success on the side of mass co-optation should still result in an overall “plus” for material co-optation.

²⁸ In February 2011, a survey conducted by the Center for Strategic Studies (CSS) showed that 85% of the population considered economic issues to be the biggest single problem for Jordan (33% rising prices, 25% unemployment, 19% poverty, 8% the general economic situation), in contrast to only 1% who thought political reform to be the most pressing issue (CSS 2011a).

²⁹ Current spending was projected to increase in the 2011 budget changed after the demonstrations started by ca. 10% in contrast to 2010 (The Jordan Times, 7 March 2011).

³⁰ Of course, resources for mass spending came from outside the country. Both the USA and the Gulf states played a crucial role here, but they have a vital interest in preserving stability in Jordan. This cost-intensive strategy will be further sustained by Jordan’s envisaged accession to the Gulf Cooperation Council, which will then be transformed into the Arab monarchy’s club against revolution.

³¹ The Jordan Times, 31 May 2011 and 29 June 2011.

3.5. Personal co-optation in Jordan

In a neo-patrimonial regime, personal co-optation is an important element. During the Arab spring, this dimension was not particularly affected. Rather, it is a mechanism that is always present, especially in the Jordanian regime that predominantly relies on the rotation of elites.

While the businessmen-dominated government was forced to resign on February 1, the security apparatus was indirectly strengthened by shuffling the former head of the General Intelligence Directorate into the office of prime minister. However, co-opting the former editor-in-chief of a large daily newspaper by appointing him to the position of minister of state for media affairs and communications and government spokesperson in the February reshuffle did not succeed.³² He resigned from his office in June protesting among other things against a more restrictive press law, thereby causing a major crisis for elites and necessitating another government reshuffle.

While the establishment of the National Dialogue Committee was discussed under the category of structural co-optation, it also implied personal co-optation. The reformist bloc of fifteen actually temporarily left the NDC after the violent attack on the youth demonstration on March 25 in order to express their anger about regime violence and the treatment of pro-reform activists. They only came back to join the committee after a face-to-face meeting with the king during which he promised them to personally guarantee the outcome of the recommendations and offered them the right to propose constitutional amendments.³³ As section 3.1. showed, these promises were not kept.³⁴

3.6. Summarizing results from Jordan

The tentative application of the legitimation framework to the Jordanian case shows that the strategies were mainly employed within the types that had been shaken by recent events. On the one hand, this proves some degree of responsiveness on the side of the regime, but in the end, the regime didn't do anything but react to pressing demands instead of act.

Table 2 below summarizes the results of the case study on Jordan. It shows a surprising *congruence between the subtype of co-optation and the question of its success*. All attempts at widening the regime base failed, while the measures geared towards strengthening the already existing regime base were successful. This implies interesting consequences for regimes under pressure. One possible interpretation that can be inferred from the Jordanian case is that

³² The Jordan Times, 22 June 2011

³³ Personal interview with member of the NDC, April 2011, Amman.

³⁴ Ironically enough, another attempt at appeasing one of the most vocal journalists from the reformist bloc might be making his brother the new spokesperson of the government and state minister for media affairs and communication in the July reshuffle (Jordan Times, 04.07.2011).

unless a political leadership in crisis is serious about true reform, a widening of the regime base is not possible. It seems to make more sense in such a case to concentrate on the already existing regime base in order to ensure its loyalty. As a mutual relation of trust might be already in place, this is an easier task than to invest precious efforts in gaining a new base. This tentatively confirms the initial hypothesis about the two subtypes of co-optation.

For dealing with the Arab spring in general, it is striking that all strategies taken are rather old. So even although the challenge in Jordan might not be as threatening as elsewhere, while the regime used to display an impressive variety of legitimation strategies (Schlumberger and Bank 2002), it seems to be a model of the past by now. Nevertheless, its stability has not yet become endangered.

Table 2: Overview over co-optation strategies in Jordan

Type	Co-optation strategies in Jordan	Subtype of co-optation	Success or failure?
structural	establishing National Dialogue Committee offering IAF participation in government	Widening Widening	Failure Failure
traditional	reassurance of tribes' loyalty (<i>wila'</i>) royal favors (<i>makrama</i>)	Strengthening Strengthening	Success Success
identity-related – national	(none – only mobilization of Anti-Palestinians)	--	--
identity-related - religious	giving leeway to radicals co-optation of religious leaders	Strengthening Strengthening	Success Success
material – collectivist	mass co-optation: subsidies salary increases overpay of public employees	Strengthening Widening? Strengthening	Success ? Success
material – neo-liberal	(none – sidelining of businessmen in government)	--	--
personal	co-optation of reform-minded journalists promising bigger mandate to NDC	Widening Widening	Failure Failure

Concerning the modes of legitimation used alongside co-optation, the preliminary results from Jordan show that the legal mode was most obviously employed in the structural type. The discourse mode or symbol politics played a role in the traditional and identity-related as well as personal co-optation strategies. The material output mode was mostly tangible in the traditional and (unsurprisingly) material types of legitimation. We find no clear-cut patterns here that relate co-optation to one specific other mode of legitimation. Instead, it is always highly intertwined with other modes of legitimation.

4. Contrasting the Jordanian experiences with other cases from the Arab world

Before turning to the final conclusions, it is interesting to take a brief look around in the rest of the Arab world that is affected by uprisings in order to get an impression of the uniqueness or representativeness of the Jordanian strategies. Of course, as other countries dispose of different bases of legitimation depending on their specific context, it is important to bear in mind that similarities and differences in co-optation strategies as well as success and failure have repercussions that differ from those in Jordan.

When we look at *structural co-optation*, it is striking that “national dialogue” has become a widely used tool in dealing with protests. Among others, in Syria and Bahrain opposition members were invited to join a national dialogue. The interesting thing here is that even in these cases where very brutal repression was perceived to be the dominant strategy, elites don’t give up on legitimation. Legal reforms such as new elections and political parties laws have also been underway in a couple of countries, again among them Syria and of course Egypt and Tunisia.

Traditional co-optation is a strategic advantage for monarchs and precludes too harsh criticism. Except for Bahrain, where it is hard to speak of an accepted traditional leadership given the societal structure, all leaders who got into serious trouble have been presidents.

Talking about *material co-optation*, we see mass allocation in absolutely all Arab states on a massive scale. Concerning the neo-liberal vein of material co-optation, Egypt witnessed the starkest opposite of co-optation. When the former president’s son, Gamal Mubarak, was ousted with his cronies even before his father stepped down, the business elite as a complete elite segment was kicked out of the inner elite circles in a much more systematic way than the superficial makeover in Jordan.

Personal co-optation is a risky endeavor in times when rulers (except for most monarchs) are called to stand down. As soon as the ruler is deposed, the person or group co-opted ends up on the losing side. Besides, hollow promises of reform are not a good time for credible leadership.

In all, the main strategies employed in Jordan are extensively used elsewhere as well. So even though the Jordanian leadership portrays itself as different from the rest of the Arab world, it does not handle challenges differently. Should the king’s claim that “Jordan will remain an oasis of stability” turn out to be true, this will be due to the successful strengthening of the regime base despite the failed attempts at its widening.³⁵

³⁵ King Abdullah at a visit to one of the most important Jordanian tribes, Jordan Times, 29 June 2011.

5. Reconsidering co-optation

Although the preliminary empirical application of the proposed conceptualization of co-optation was fragmentary at best, it yielded interesting results that make further occupation with the topic worthwhile. The subdivision of co-optation into the two subtypes of strengthening and widening the regime base seems to be promising as well. A more refined set of tools for assessing the success and failure of co-optation strategies would be highly desirable as it seems indispensable. Furthermore, making the concept accessible to comparative research would increase its usefulness.

The empirical part showed that co-optation is always highly intertwined with other modes of legitimation. The question is thus whether it makes sense at all to speak of co-optation as a distinct mode. The preliminary conclusion of this paper (which comes even as a surprise to the author) is: maybe not. Co-optation does not have a “vehicle” of its own by which it can be implemented, but is always bound to other modes of legitimation. These modes in turn are not exclusive to co-optation, but may also serve other ends. It has become clear that co-optation is much less a mechanism of rule of its own right than the byproduct or result of other measures that jointly have the effect of co-optation. Co-optation thus denotes a general tendency and effect that very different strategies may have.

Now, if co-optation is but one of the results of different strategies that facilitate the maintenance of rule, what are then other possible outcomes? As co-optation is a way of inclusion, maybe exclusion is another way of securing political power. But then, the inclusion of some always has the effect of excluding others anyway, as outlined in the conceptual chapter. These categories can therefore not be regarded as mutually exclusive. The same holds true for power politics in the sense of *divide and rule* – co-optation itself can serve to sideline others. It would be a challenging task to further elaborate on the “dark side” of co-optation.

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