Studies of repression’s effects on mobilization overwhelmingly focus on how severe repression affects the volume of protest, overlooking how activists perceive and experience a range of repressive tactics and how their tactical adaptations to this repertoire produce broader patterns of contention. This study therefore identifies repression’s variegated forms and movements’ corresponding responses using fifty-seven interviews with reform-oriented activists in Jordan, a “liberalized” authoritarian state, obtained in 2011. The findings demonstrate that activists (1) transformed softer repression into valued opportunities for communication with officials, and (2) responded to harder forms by publicizing repression through protests and their alliance networks, which persuaded the image-conscious regime to temper its tactics and prompted both sides to return to bargaining. This dynamic exemplifies a process of contained escalation, which helps to explain why Jordan’s Arab Spring remained nonrevolutionary. I conclude by discussing the implications for studies of repression and response in illiberal contexts.

Scholarship on social movements has long recognized that a regime’s capacity and propensity for repression determines the costs of mobilization, thereby shaping challengers’ responses (McAdam 1982, 1996; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Tilly 1978). Studies of the “repression-dissent nexus” typically analyze how severe repression affects the size and frequency of public protests, though linear and curvilinear models have proven unwieldy when tested across time and place (Lichbach 1987). In order to better understand repression’s effects, scholars have analyzed movements’ tactical adaptations to repression (McAdam 1983), how repression is perceived by movements (Opp and Roehl 1990), and repression as a repertoire of tactics (Tilly 2006). But despite these contributions, relatively few studies analyze repression and response as an interactive dynamic, specifying how movements adapt privately and publicly to a range of state actions. Moreover, because of the literature’s focus on protest cycles and acute conflicts, we know especially little about the conditions under which activists’ strategies produce bargaining with state officials, particularly in non-democratic contexts.

In order to address these shortcomings, this study identifies activists’ adaptations to a range of repressive strategies and analyzes how their ensuing interactions with state agents shape the character of contention in the Kingdom of Jordan, a “liberalized” authoritarian state. Using data obtained in 2011 from interviews with reform-oriented activists, I find that challengers utilized softer repression as valued mechanisms for communication with state
agents and rebelled against harsher forms by making their grievances public. The latter strategy prompted officials to temper their repressive responses, after which activists withdrew their publicizing tactics and re-entered into private bargaining with officials. I then demonstrate how this dynamic produced “contained escalation” during the onset of the Arab Spring, and discuss the broader implications of these findings for studying repression and dissent.

**DISAGGREGATING THE REPRESSION-DISSENT NEXUS**

Studies of state-society relations and contentious politics have long been interested in understanding the reactions of dissidents to repression. Whether dissidents are able to survive and expand their mobilization efforts in the face of state-instigated hostilities has critical implications for political development and social change in any context. However, discerning the effects of state repression on mobilization has produced a puzzle that scholars have been grappling with for over four decades—namely, that state coercion prompts movement escalation and deterrence (Feierabend and Feierabend 1966; Gurr 1969; Hibbs 1973; Synder and Tilly 1972; Tilly 1978). Efforts to refine linear hypotheses regarding repression’s positive or negative effects have produced U-shaped (Lichbach and Gurr 1981) and inverted U-shaped models (Gurr 1970), the latter proposing that moderate or inconsistent repression will increase protest, while minimal or severe degrees of repression will reduce it. By considering repression as part of the broader set of opportunities and constraints impacting mobilization, some proponents of the political process paradigm have found additional support for the inverted-U model (Eisinger 1973; Muller 1985); however, empirical tests of curvilinear models have received only mixed support when tested across time and place (DeNardo 1985; Francisco 1996; Opp 1994).

By using aggregated event data, the repression-dissent nexus is most typically conceived as how the relative severity of repression affects the volume of protest (e.g., Carey 2006, 2009; Davenport 1995, 1997; Earl and Soule 2010; Francisco 1995, 1996; Ortiz 2007). However, this analytical paradigm has numerous shortcomings. Attempts to derive “action-reaction” models reduce challenger-state interactions to a “unidimensional” dynamic, such that one is “forever correlating the total aggregate level of one output (government repression) with the total aggregate level of the other output (opposition activity)” (Lichbach 1987: 288). Scales denoting low, moderate, and high levels of repression vary by what type of crackdowns “count” for any given case and neglect mitigating factors such as changes in types and degrees of repression across the protest cycle. Additionally, the proposition that violence constrains protest does not explain why mobilization emerges in highly repressive contexts (Alimi 2009; Almeida 2003; Kurzman 1996; Loveman 1998; Inclán 2008; Rasler 1996). Several lines of research have subsequently emerged in order to better understand repression’s mixed effects. As Lichbach (1987) proposes, the question should not be whether repression deters or encourages protest, but rather how it forces changes in movements’ tactics. As demonstrated by McAdam (1983), crackdowns force challengers to innovate their strategies. As each side adapts to the other’s countermoves, this produces a chess-like sequence of tactical interactions between states and insurgents. McAdam (1983: 738) finds that activists counter repression and offset their relative powerlessness by creating public spectacles, thus placing state aggression in the spotlight and provoking agents into undermining the government’s morality and legitimacy. When democratic states respond to peaceful protest with disproportionate force, this compels responsible officials to at least make the “right combination of reciprocal noises” in response (Dahl 1956: 146). Thus, tactical innovations grant movements leverage by producing negative inducements to bargaining (Lipsky 1968; Wilson 1961). While provoking the state into increasing street-level repression
is a high-risk strategy, movements may calculate that absorbing these costs is the only pathway to bargaining in a hostile political environment.

In order to further investigate why repression produces heightened episodes of contention, studies have demonstrated that revolts and revolutions are a function of collective actors’ subjective evaluations of political opportunities and constraints, rather than just the products of quantitative increases in violence (Kurzman 2004). Contrary to the inverted-U model, repression creates a backlash effect when movement members perceive state coercion or violence to be unjust relative to expectations about how authorities should act (Almeida 2003; Loveman 1998). When governments revert to authoritarianism (Inclán 2008) and react to dissent with a disproportionately severe response (White 1989), collective actors come to view states as illegitimate (Hess and Martin 2006; Opp and Roehl 1990) and perceive that they have more to gain from rebellion than quiescence (Einwohner 2003; Goodwin 2001; White 1989). Though authorities may later attempt to subdue insurgencies with limited concessions, these measures are unlikely to be effective if backlash has already prompted movements to adopt an antigovernment stance (Rasler 1996). Severe repression will only instigate prolonged conflict periods and revolutions, therefore, when repression signals a significant deprivation of life and liberty to movements and their sympathizers.

Because repression is most typically conceived of as physical coercion, however, scholars have also sought to broaden its definition in order to take seriously the notion of repression as a repertoire of actions (Tilly 2006). Typologies of repression, such as those developed by Marx (1979) and Earl (2003), attend to forms that impact mobilization in important ways but are not easily quantified or accounted for in traditional data sources (Cunningham 2004; Davenport 2005, 2007). Research discussing relatively “softer” techniques such as channeling, silencing, and surveillance argue that these forms make “collective action difficult to undertake in the first place” (Walder 1986: 18) and convert movement efforts into defensive, nontransgressive modes of action (Earl 2005; Ferree 2004; Jenkins and Eckert 1986; Piven and Cloward 1977; Starr, Fernandez, Amster, Wood, and Caro 2008). This literature argues that these subtler types of social control are highly effective at attenuating activism because they allow governments to undermine opposition while maintaining a veneer of liberalism (Barkan 2006; Boykoff 2007; della Porta and Fillieule 2004; Marx 1974, 1981; Oliver 2008).

Though these aforementioned literatures have greatly advanced the study of repression’s effects, we still know surprisingly little about how activists across movements perceive, experience, and adapt to the state’s fuller repertoire and how state-challenger interactions shape broader dynamics of contention (Chang 2008). Because the literature is disproportionately focused on cases in which governments’ inflexibility produced acute protest cycles and conflicts (Su and He 2010), we know far less about how private and public adaptations to repression lead to bargaining (Johnston 2005; Johnston and Mueller 2001; O’Brien and Stern 2008). These gaps are particularly apparent in studies of nondemocracies, which tend to conceptualize these regimes as closed to dissent (e.g., Osa and Schock 2007: 127). Rather than acting like totalitarian ideal-types, however, illiberal states in the post-Cold War period typically allow for limited forms of opposition and manage activism in ways that are not limited to brute force or corporatist control (Chen 2012; Diamond 2002; Levitsky and Way 2010). Therefore, a more refined analysis of how activists in nondemocratic states adapt to their repressive environments and create bargaining leverage is warranted. To this end, I analyze repression and response in the Kingdom of Jordan in order to understand what repression is and how activists respond, and to inductively derive the character of contention in this “liberalized” authoritarian state.
JORDAN IN THE POST-1989 “LIBERALIZATION” PERIOD

The Kingdom of Jordan has remained authoritarian for over forty years, though the degree of authoritarianism has changed over time. Jordan has been governed by the Hashemite monarchy since its formal independence in 1946 and became a constitutional monarchy in 1952, when the first phase of liberalization established a bicameral National Assembly and legalized political parties. However, in response to civil strife caused by the Arab-Israeli conflict, King Hussein imposed martial law in 1967, banning political parties and imposing harsh limitations on civil liberties.

Jordan’s political economy, like many Middle Eastern countries, is shaped by tribal patronage. Transjordanian “East Bank” tribes comprise the Hashemite monarchy’s traditional constituent base and exchange political support for public employment, scholarships and subsidies to universities (maqrumah), and discretionary funding for Transjordanian-dominated governorates. As such, state benefits are typically secured on the basis of one’s kinship connections (wasta). However, the effects of the 1980s global recession and subsequent neoliberal reforms upset this Transjordanian-Hashemite social contract, and austerity measures decimated the resources needed to maintain patronage ties. Economic decline during this period sparked “bread riots” in Transjordanian regions previously supportive of the regime, and in response King Hussein introduced a series of reforms in 1989, which rescinded martial law, permitted candidates to vie for the lower house as independent candidates, and promised greater press, speech, and organizing freedoms (Greenwood 2003). These reforms marked Jordan’s transition to a “liberalized” authoritarian state. After his father’s death in 1999, it was widely hoped that King Abdullah II would open Jordan’s political system further. However, NGOs and academics have documented sustained deficiencies in democratization (e.g., Human Rights Watch 2006; Yom 2009). As of 2013, Abdullah retained the right to declare laws by decree, dissolve the government, and appoint the prime minister, the senate, and governors.

Historical challenges to the monarchy have prompted the regime to silence discussion about Jordan’s Palestinian majority, and about foreign relations in general. Though the royal family publicly supports Palestinian liberation (Schwedler and Fayyaz 2010), demands of the Palestinian movement against the Israeli occupation and in favor of the right of return are also suppressed. Though the Palestinian-dominated Muslim Brotherhood has maintained a largely peaceful relationship with the regime since 1989, their organization takes a hard line against the “Zionist entity” and campaigns against Jordan’s policy of political and economic “normalization” with Israel (Sham and Lucas 2003). Schwedler (1998, 2002, 2003, 2005) has also noted the violent dispersion of demonstrations and the arbitrary detention of activists accused of working to oppose normalization, Israeli military campaigns, and U.S. policy on Iraq.

Since the early 1990s, Jordan has witnessed a steady growth of political parties, local and international NGOs, and social movement organizations (SMOs) demanding economic redress, human rights, and democratic development. However, local NGOs are constrained by restrictive laws and decrees monitoring freedoms of speech and assembly. Jordan’s infamous intelligence agency, the General Intelligence Directorate (GID, or al-Mukhabarat), “manages” civil society organizations and independent critics to ensure that they do not cross “red lines,” or sociopolitical taboos, in their discourse or tactics (Wiktorowicz 2000). This wing of the security apparatus is an opaque institution with broad powers to interfere widely in political and private life (MacFarquhar 2005; Ryan 2011). Its role is not specified in Jordanian law, and international NGOs accuse the GID of holding suspects indefinitely without charge and using violence in the handling of detainees (Human Rights Watch 2006). Any person or organization accused of lese majesty, sowing civil strife, promoting sectarianism, harming national unity, or challenging the constitution may be subjected to repression by the security apparatus, including referral to the State Security Court. This court,
comprised largely of military judges and prosecutors, is a closed tribunal dedicated to per-
secuting offenses against the state, and defendants may be subjected to pretrial detention
without legal representation.

In sum, the Jordanian regime exemplifies “liberalized authoritarianism” in that the state
has modified its draconian policies and upholds some limited political freedoms and civil
liberties. However, despite the fact that the regime projects a reformist image, Jordan’s
political system is far from a democratic one. Given the fact that the regime works to maintain
a liberalized face while enforcing the authoritarian status quo, how does the state repress
reform-oriented activists, and what are their tactical responses?

DATA AND ANALYTIC PROCEDURES

In order to identify state-instigated obstacles to reform-oriented activism, challengers’ tactical
adaptations, and patterns of contention in Jordan, I analyze data derived from interviews with
fifty-seven leaders and participants in SMOs, local NGOs, government-founded NGOs,
international NGOs (INGOs), and political parties in the second half of 2011 (see table 1).
All interviews were conducted by the author and lasted one to three hours; approximately
half of the interviews were conducted in English, and the rest were conducted with the
assistance of an interpreter in Arabic. Respondents were asked to reflect on the timing of
and rationales for mobilization, their organizational aims and tactics, challenges and
successes, experiences with repression, interactions with state officials, including those
governmental entities that repressed them (if known), and to compare their experiences with
those of their colleagues. Because the interviews began in August 2011, activists were also
asked to reflect on their experiences during the nascent Arab Spring period. Accounts of
public confrontations were triangulated by media reports when available. The open-ended
structure of the interview process allowed respondents to discuss a wide range of state
instigated obstacles to activism and interactions with the security apparatus not readily
knowable by other methods, such that “repression” took on meanings not preconceived by the
author. The typology of repressive tactics derived from activists’ accounts, therefore,
illuminates both overt and covert forms of repression (Earl 2003) that activists perceive and
react to, and does not rely solely on information accounted for in media sources (e.g.,
Khawaja 1993) or the records of the repressive apparatus itself (e.g., Cunningham 2004).

Interviews were obtained through snowball sampling methods, in which referrals were
requested from contacts in both SMO and NGO networks. Because more than half of the
interviewees were affiliated with more than one SMO or worked in SMO and NGO sectors,
respondents provided referrals to others across organizational sectors and in different geo-
graphical regions. The sampling method targeted activists who were identified by their peers
as holding prominent roles and as having extensive experience working for reform. I also
purposefully sought interviews with respondents working across Jordan, and gained access to
activists in the southern cities of al-Tafilah, al-Karak, and Madaba, in the more central
locations of Amman, Fuheis, and al-Salt, and in the northern cities of Jerash and Irbid. All
other organizations have headquarters in Amman, though their activities may take place in
other regions. Many of the most prominent SMOs reside outside of the capital in cities
dominated by Transjordanians, whereas Amman is demographically dominated by those of
Palestinian origin.

Unlike most studies examining the effects of repression on collective action, I include
activists working through institutionalized channels of reform for several reasons. While some
literature on repression in Jordan suggests that local NGOs are rendered impotent by state
oversight (Wiktorowicz 2000, 2001), I argue that any organization advocating policy changes
aimed at resource redistribution, human rights, and democratic reform has built within its very
Table 1. Organizational Affiliations of Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SMOs</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Popular Pro-Reform Movements</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor Movements (Teachers, Daily Laborers, Veterans)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Antinormalization Coalition</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local NGOs</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government-founded NGOs</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International NGOs (INGOs)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Parties</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Numbers do not add to 57 due to the fact that some interviewees have multiple affiliations.

existence and mission a potential threat to the regime’s patronage system and to the ability of the regime to keep up appearances as liberalized. NGOs wield degrees of “naming and shaming” power (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2007; Ron 2000) that directly challenge the practices of governments and the security apparatus. Even when mobilization is tacitly sanctioned through NGO certification, contesting the regime still entails real risk as state agents attempt to prevent challengers from crossing “red lines.” As a respondent working in an NGO and SMO reported, anyone involved in activism in Jordan must accept “that they will be in trouble or they will expect to be in trouble…. Because you are going to defend the rights of the people, and this contradicts, in general, the regime.” This warrants the inclusion of NGO activists and the comparison of their experiences with noninstitutionalized actors.

The interview sample is 77 percent male, with 98 percent of all participants having attained a bachelor’s degree or higher, and 70 percent are between the ages of 18 and 49. Fifty-three percent have at least one SMO affiliation, including labor movements, the anti-normalization coalition, the Muslim Brotherhood, and popular democratic reform movements.

To code the interviews using a grounded approach, I first selected a sample of the total interview transcripts representing different organizations for open coding procedures (Charmaz 2006) using a software called Dedoose. This allowed the data to emerge in codes based on activist observations and actions. I then grouped and refined the 758 initial codes into “focused codes” according to prevalent patterns, which were used to code all of the interview transcripts. Focused codes were constantly compared with the data to ensure against remolding actions or processes to prematurely imposed categories (Glaser 1965). The findings are detailed below.

REPRESSION IN THE “LIBERALIZED” ERA: A TYPOLOGY

By analyzing activists’ experiential accounts, I distinguish between seven main types of repression (see table 2), which are elaborated in the following section: (1) outreach, (2) “disattention,” which is defined below, (3) censorship and resource deprivation, (4) slander and legal persecution, (5) threats, (6) the mobilization of countergroup(s), and (7) physical confinement and bodily harm.

The agents of state repression are disaggregated into a typology of security forces, governmental sectors, and third parties (see table 3). Activists’ accounts of interactions and confrontations with state agents most frequently involved members of the covert Intelligence (GID, or al-Mukhabarat), while the gendarmerie (al-Darak), police (al-Shurtah), and army (al-Jaysh) were typically confronted during public protests. Within the government, activists attributed their repression to ministers, members of parliament, local officials, and the Royal Court. Third-party agents include two types: (1) groups of thugs who verbally or physically harass
Table 2. Typology of Repressive Tactics in Jordan in the Post-1989 Liberalization Period

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Repressive Tactic</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Outreach</td>
<td>The mechanism used by governmental entities, most commonly by the GID, of establishing contact with activists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Surveillance</td>
<td>The tapping, hacking, and recording of communications, including in-person monitoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Inquiry</td>
<td>The questioning of activists’ plans, affiliations, funding sources, demands, and tactics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Negotiation</td>
<td>Attempts to persuade activists to cease their actions or self-censor their demands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Disattention</td>
<td>An instance when state institutions selectively and purposefully withhold recognition of activists who are attempting to elicit a response from a governmental dept. or state representative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Censorship and Resource Deprivation</td>
<td>The forced modification of activists’ discourses and actions, e.g., firing public sector workers, hacking activists’ websites, shutting down NGOs, depriving NGOs of funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Slander and Legal Persecution</td>
<td>Defamation against activists as threatening to Jordan’s unity and stability (negative othering) or as criminal and immoral (dishonoring); defamations are mirrored in the charges raised against activists in the State Security Court</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Threats</td>
<td>Verbal warnings that activists will be publicly slandered, fired, arrested, put in prison, or incur retaliations against family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Mobilizing Countergroups</td>
<td>An instance when the state overtly or tacitly condones relatively autonomous groups to enact repression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Inciting Thuggish Groups</td>
<td>Groups encouraged or paid by the government to verbally harass or physically attack activists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Cloning SMOs</td>
<td>Official, state-sanctioned groups that copy challenger organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Physical Confinement and Bodily Harm</td>
<td>Attempts to confine and punish activists for crossing sociopolitical “red lines”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Banning Travel</td>
<td>The confiscation of activists’ passports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Forcing Exile</td>
<td>The expulsion of activists from Jordan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Arresting/Kidnapping</td>
<td>Taking activists into custody, sometimes through violent or covert methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Detaining/Imprisoning</td>
<td>Holding activists in secret detention facilities or imprisoning them for longer periods; this may occur without formal charges or legal representation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and attack activists, and (2) accredited groups deployed by the regime to undermine movements by slandering them (e.g., state media), usurping their platforms and constituents (e.g., clone groups), or urging them to cease their actions or self-censor their demands (e.g., tribal leaders). The final category includes foreign collaborators with the Jordanian regime, such as the American government. For example, an antinormalization SMO participant received a letter from the American FBI citing that they had shut down his website for its alleged support of terrorist activities, which deprived him of his ability to publish his grievances against the regime.
Table 3. Attributed Sources of Repression in Jordan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Official Security Apparatus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. General Intelligence Directorate (al-Mukhabarat)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Gendarmerie (al-Darak)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Police/Public Security Directorate (al-Shurta/Amn al-ʻAmm)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Army (al-Jaysh)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2. Government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Ministers/Ministries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. MPs/Parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Local Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Royal Court</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3. Third Parties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Thugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Accredited Groups (e.g, state-run media, tribal heads, cloned groups)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 4. Foreign Governments                              |

SMO participants reported experiencing the widest range of repressive tactics (types 1-7; see table 2). NGO activists reported multiple encounters with types 1-4, avoiding threats (5), countergroup mobilization (6), and physical confinement and bodily harm (7). None of the interviewees participating only in international NGOs (INGOs)—which enjoyed the most autonomy from the state—or government-founded NGOs—those with the least autonomy from the state—reported experiencing any repression. INGO employees explained that state retaliation against their work is impossible, since such organizations are established through bilateral agreements between the Jordanian government and its foreign allies. Because repression of INGO workers would directly reinforce INGO claims that Jordan is not living up to its promised reforms, the state has clear incentives to refrain from repressing INGO activists. Government-founded NGO respondents also denied experiencing any illicit or unwanted state interference. While these activists insist that they are uninhibited and independent, their agendas are mandated by royal initiatives (and not coincidentally, their walls are often plastered with oversized photographs of the royal family). Because these organizations channel regime-supporting volunteers into regime-legitimizing programs, this likely precludes the need for repression, since the monitoring of their aims and activities is built into the structure of the organization itself.

In reality, however, reform-minded individuals often engage in both institutionalized and noninstitutionalized activism. As such, activists experience repression depending on the configuration of their affiliations. For example, an SMO-INGO respondent reported that after protesting against the American occupation of Iraq in 2006 (outside of his role as an INGO employee) he was kidnapped by the GID and held in an underground detention facility for approximately eight hours. When asked why he was released, he stated that interrogators discovered that he was also working on an INGO-commissioned human rights project regarding the GID’s use of secret detention facilities. So while this activist was physically repressed because of his SMO-related actions, this repression was mitigated after the GID discovered his role as an INGO observer, and he was released without further incident. Therefore, the amalgamation of activists’ affiliations may invite and mitigate harsher repression. I find that activists involved in SMOs and INGOs, SMOs and NGOs, SMOs and political parties, only SMOs, only NGOs, and only political parties all reported experiencing repression. The typology of repression is arrayed on a continuum from relatively softer to harsher actions based on activists’ grievances and experiences, though I emphasize that all
Repression, Response, and Contained Escalation

Repressive actions are considered egregious offenses that violate expectations about how the Jordanian state should act.

The first type of repression is outreach, which refers to the practice used by governmental entities of establishing contact with activist leaders through surveillance, inquiries, and negotiations. Surveillance includes the tapping and recording of telephone and email communications, website hacking and alteration, and the in-person monitoring of activists. An irony of this covert tactic is that it is easily detectable; delays and sound interference on the lines were a clear sign of phone taps, for example, and in-person surveillance by plain-clothed officers or infiltrators was observable first or second hand. The GID also recruited activists’ colleagues for surveillance. As an NGO director reported, “some people they told me that the Mukhabarat asked them to be my friends and write reports about me. I’m sure that I have people around me who write reports.” During inquiries, GID officers or other state officials asked activists about their funding sources, demands, and tactics. “They try to make friendship with you,” an NGO activist recalled, as when the GID asked him, “Why we are not friends, together? Why you want to make some [election] monitoring?” Inquiry transitioned to negotiation—attempts to persuade the activist to cease their activities or self-censor their grievances—if the inquiring entity perceived activists to be crossing red lines. An NGO founder recalled that after working on assessments describing Jordan’s lack of compliance with the UN’s Convention Against Torture, officers called him to argue, “Why you make this? This is not good for Jordan!”

The second repressive type is disattention, defined as an instance when state institutions selectively withhold recognition of activists who are attempting to elicit a response from a governmental department or high-level state representative. Typical manifestations of disattention toward NGO activists include when the government avoids their formal requests to implement a program, or ignores their formal complaints regarding rights violations. SMOs experience disattention from governmental departments when their public or private efforts to elicit a dialogue with officials are stalled or ignored. Contrary to what might be expected in a “closed” authoritarian state, activists expect to be granted formal and informal recognition by state agents, which enables them to air their grievances, enter into negotiations, and expand their activities. Ironically, the frequent high-level attention given to activist leaders and organizations distinguishes disattention from their otherwise routine access to political elites and the security apparatus. As such, respondents logically did not believe that disattention stems simply from a lack of state capacity to recognize their requests. When the state cuts off these normative channels of bargaining, activists consider this a selective and deliberate form of repression.

The third repressive type is censorship and resource deprivation by ministries and the GID, which reflects Marx’s (1979: 96) definition of “directing energies of movement to defensive maintenance needs and away from pursuit of broader social goals.” NGOs were forced to modify their agendas, programs, and publications, and also reported what I term activist “weeding,” which occurred when the government denied permission for named individuals to participate in their programs. Because NGOs were required to submit the names of all participants working on a project to a local government office (until February 2011), any number of activists could be weeded out of participating in a given activity. NGO offices were also forcibly closed after publishing damning reports regarding the regime’s human rights record. The head of one such closed organization attested that after his friend, an ex-minister, read his report:

He told me, “If I [was still] minister and I am not your friend, I put you in jail, not only close your organization!” . . . because it makes a scandal for the regime…. At that time not only the media [discussed the report]. . . .The scare [is] always [about] the international response! Because . . . the State Department took some quotations from our report! . . . Here, they are very sensitive, if this comes in the American State Department report.
The content of NGO reports and programs were often the cause of repression. One NGO was temporarily closed after it sponsored a conference wherein a presenter’s speech “touched a red line,” according to the GID. Resource deprivations facing SMO activists included closing their Facebook accounts and personal websites, prohibiting them from publishing in Jordanian newspapers, firing state employees active in labor movements, and preventing SMOs from holding marches and meetings in public or semipublic locations. As a leader in the teacher’s movement explained, the government represses by “trying to make us poor—making us think of bread only.” Resource deprivation could also extend beyond individual activists or SMOs to affect their proximate community. Two SMO groups reported that when they attempted to hold public gatherings, electricity was cut to the entire neighborhood.

The fourth type of repression is slander and legal persecution. Accounts detailing legal persecution demonstrate that activists were prone to referrals to the State Security Court, and that the charges mirrored the slander leveled against them by government officials, counter-groups, and the state-run press. Slander against an individual or organization may be of two types: “negative othering” or “dishonoring.” Negative othering defames activists as a foreign threat working to hamper national unity and against Jordan’s interests, which is often synonymous with being dubbed a Palestinian, an Islamist, or an antimonarchist. The second type of slander, dishonoring, refers to the claim that an activist is dishonest, immoral, or criminal. Such slander may be married with legal persecution, since accusations of lese majesty, inciting civil strife, corruption, or sex-related crimes are often directly conjoined with court cases against activists. Activists were likely to be referred to the State Security Court after being slandered, though they might not be officially charged.

Threats are the fifth form of repression. Illustrative is the experience of a leader in an SMO dedicated to legalizing an association for teachers (hereafter referred to as the Teacher’s SMO). He stated that in meetings initiated by the Mukhabarat, “in the beginning it was more like dialogue . . . but then it started taking a different direction when there were threats of transferring teachers to different schools . . . or expelling them from their positions.” Another SMO leader reported that the GID called her to threaten, “we will make some porno photos of you and publish on the Facebook.” They also threatened to send these photos to her husband. A labor organizer also reported that the GID told him, “you will be thrown in prison, because you’re demanding an association, which is a red line. You are overreaching.” Threats directed at family members included the potential rescinding of subsidies for university tuition or the firing of relatives employed in state sectors.

Repressive entities may also directly or indirectly encourage the mobilization of counter-groups, the sixth repressive type, to enact repression. This includes groups of thugs and clone organizations, which are officially sanctioned groups that copy SMOs. Thug attacks against individual activists or protesting groups took several forms. Respondents reported that slander and the state-run media were used to mobilize segments of Transjordanians—presumed to be civilians—to attack demonstrators. In addition, persons known to be convicted criminals were reported to have been paid by the government to harass activists verbally or physically during events or outside of their homes, or to create disruption or sabotage in the community. Clone groups undermined SMOs by “officially” representing their constituents’ interests and by publically opposing the platforms and tactics of the original organization. Since clone groups were the only organizations permitted to meet with officials or given a voice in state-run press, this also resulted in systematic disattention to the original SMO.

The seventh and final type of repression is physical confinement and bodily harm. Physical confinement includes banning activists from traveling outside Jordan, forcing them into exile, and arresting, detaining, and imprisoning activists. Bodily harm sometimes occurred during the course of arrest and detention, through protest dispersion on the street, or attacks by thugs. Activists attested that these forms of repression became less common after 1989; however, such incidents continued against SMOs and prompted tactical escalation, as the following sections will discuss.
TACTICAL ADAPTATIONS BY PRO-REFORM CHALLENGERS

I find that the Jordanian state’s variegated and primarily nonphysical repressive repertoire produced two general tactical adaptations by reform-oriented challengers in the post-1989 “liberalization” period. First, activists transformed softer, routine forms of repression into valued opportunities for communication with state agents. Second, they responded to harder forms of repression by engaging in public protests and activating their alliance networks.19 These tactics called the regime’s legitimacy and liberalized status into question, thus providing activists with some protection and the leverage needed to force their opponents to mitigate repression and re-open the bargaining process.

Transforming Repression into Opportunity

My findings reveal that activists strategically exploited softer, routine forms of repression and transformed them into opportunities to dialogue with and even challenge the state. Activists used outreach to relay their grievances, present themselves and their work as honorable and legitimate, and challenge the terms of their repression and the legitimacy of the repressive agents. Importantly, dialogic interactions with the GID were the mechanism by which activists’ fear of the intelligence service diminished gradually over the liberalized period, which subsequently empowered them to make riskier claims.

Inquiries led to frank discussions with the GID over activists’ grievances. A leader in the teacher’s SMO recalled that she was summoned to the Intelligence with three other colleagues in 2010, and reported that they openly discussed “our demands [and] how we see the regime, the government system, the repression, and the deteriorating position of teachers in society.” An activist in the 2011 pro-reform movement reported that being summoned to the GID headquarters in ‘Amman made her “so happy, and I don’t . . . wish to leave!” because she used this opportunity to report a litany of grievances directly to the inquiring officer. Activists also presented evidence to bolster their claims against the state during these encounters. For example, an antinormalization leftist presented a list of Palestinians who had been granted Jordanian citizenship to a GID officer as evidence that Jordan is becoming the alternative homeland for Palestinians. He argued that the corrupted practices among the elite are “known,” and that he wants to take the prime minister to court, but the “system” prevents this. Denied access to the political and legal mechanisms needed to more formally challenge state policy, this interaction provided him with an opportunity—indeed, the only opportunity—to present evidence against the regime directly to a state representative.

Surveillance also enabled activists to communicate their grievances. For example, an SMO activist engaged his surveilling GID officer during a televised interview:

An intelligence spy . . . was writing what I am saying to the TV. And when I finish, I say, “Oh, it seems that you did not write everything I said. Would like you me to repeat it for you?” He was laughing . . . and we shared some ideas together. He said to me, “Look . . . we know that you are right.”

Despite the fact that NGO and SMO activists unequivocally named the GID as a repressive and corrupt institution, numerous accounts reported amicable interactions with individual agents. As a leader in the free Tafayleh neighborhood movement noted,

In every march we have al-Mukhabarat taking reports and writing . . . we have some events in closed areas, and these guys ask permission to come in. We welcome them . . . Sometimes they miss what we are calling for, and then we give them—“this is what we said, as-sh’ab yurid . . . [the people want . . .]” [laughs] This is very important, to be fair with the Mukhabarat.
Despite the illegitimacy of the GID’s overreaching and coercive authority, the relationships cultivated between individual intelligence agents and activists during outreach could also be used to facilitate activism. NGOs facing censorship and resource deprivation by ministries or local government officials might use their connections with particular GID officers to have their programs reinstated. For example, one development NGO for youth and women reported receiving weekly or even daily inquiring calls from the same GID officer. He explained that while this practice is emblematic of the corruption and repression, this officer was able to grant him permission to enact a program arbitrarily denied by a ministry. Additionally, some SMO labor activists credited their contacts in the GID with convincing governmental representatives to take their demands seriously and begin negotiations. Thus, while activists considered outreach as repressive, they also used their contacts with individual agents to mitigate repression stemming from other governmental entities.

If direct channels for dialogue with the GID or government were not available, activists could transmit messages about their work in other ways. Savvy to the near-constant monitoring of their private communications, an SMO activist reported, “when we want a message to go directly to the Mukhabarat, we say it clearly on the telephone so that they hear it!” Another tactic was to “self-report” to the GID, making one’s goals and tactics transparent to the authorities through surveillance in order to justify one’s activism as honorable. As an NGO director reported, “I don’t have any problem if people write credible reports about what I say, because what I say in the closed meeting, it’s the same as what I say in a public meeting. . . . I like people who are around me, who at least do not have problems with me, who will write reports to the Mukhabarat.”

Because these interactions provided valuable opportunities to communicate amicably with the GID, another NGO director discussed how unfortunate it was that he did not have any direct contacts with individuals in the Intelligence:

I believe that it is a problem that we don’t have these contacts. . . . People, they are telling me that [the GID] asked them to spy on me . . . and maybe we create a kind of perception among the government that we are not looking or putting ourselves in a way to cooperate. And maybe it’s our mistake . . . because you have to influence people by talking to them, and . . . gaining their trust or respect through this personal kind of contact.

This interviewee stated that one important consequence of his isolation is the possibility that the GID may be getting information about him and his work second or third hand, possibly through unknown or untrustworthy sources, which is not preferable to representing himself through surveillance and dialogue as a trustworthy and transparent individual.

However, activists recognized that these informal pathways for communicating with state agents lie outside of the rule of law, are arbitrary and unpredictable means of recognition, and are no substitute for rationalized practices. As such, they also challenged the informality of outreach practices by demanding that interactions with the GID take place in an official or transparent fashion, and on the activists’ terms. For example, a spokesman for the popular movement of al-Salt explained that a Mukhabarat officer “wanted to summon me, and I said do you want me in an official capacity or in a personal capacity? And he said no, I want just to talk personally with you about what’s going on, and I said ‘No, you can’t . . . [but] if you want me to come officially . . . I would be very happy to.”’ The GID did not escalate repression in response to his refusal, but merely persisted in contacting the activist in order to try and persuade him to engage in informal dialogue. An NGO head similarly reported that he had rebuffed a number of invitations from the Intelligence over a period of three years to talk: “They call me and say, can you come to drink coffee and to talk and to discuss some ideas? And I mention my opinion is very clear, because…we announce everything, we publish who is sponsoring our activities. . . . It’s nothing to be secret about.” As another SMO representative reported,
We were called more than ten times by the head of the Mukhabarat telling us come to have coffee in their offices. The answer was no, if you want, our houses are very big and we have very good coffee too. So if you want to come to our houses [you can]. . . . Otherwise you can come and arrest us, it’s no problem.

After an activist was invited to the prime minister’s office to discuss critiques he had written in a newspaper, he responded by saying, “[If] you want to talk to me, either you answer me in the newspaper or you come to . . . the big hall, in front of everybody. Because if I come to your office and you close the door, then everybody will say you paid me a corruption. If you are not afraid, come outside, I will discuss with you.” The dialogic aspect of outreach was not questioned by activists; on the contrary, it was encouraged. It was the private, nontransparent mode of dialogue that was challenged as illegitimate.

Every activist attributed the violent repression of the preliberalization period to the GID. Dialogues, therefore, became a mechanism by which activists’ fear of the security apparatus diminished. For example, an SMO participant recalled, “I was first concerned because you would hear about how brutal or how violent they are, but surprisingly things have changed.” He noted that—despite being subjected to negotiations, threats, and arrests—the GID acted with restraint relative to what he expected. This signaled to activists that broaching “red line” topics entailed less risk than predicted, thus emboldening them to breach sociopolitical taboos. For example, after activists in the teacher’s SMO were verbally threatened by the GID in 2010, a representative reported that:

Having an association became a crucial demand, and we were not going to retreat. [The GID] were saying that it’s unconstitutional . . . so we were saying why not amend the constitution so that it would allow having a teacher’s association? It’s a red line? We can make it not a red line! And the teachers were among the very first to call for constitutional amendments. And we stopped fearing. There wasn’t anything that we wouldn’t talk about in our meetings with the Mukhabarat…. We said you guys need to go fight corruption! Why you are just stuck being against the teacher’s association?

Regime attempts to constrain activism through surveillance, inquiries, and negotiations, therefore, were not one-sided. Instead, activists exploited the regime’s “softer” approach, transforming outreach into informal, private pathways to bargaining with state agents.

Drawing in the “Crowd”: Publicizing Repression

Harsher repressive forms, including disattention, censorship and resource deprivation, slander and legal persecution, threats, countergroup mobilization, physical confinement, and bodily harm, prompted activists to publicize repression through protests and to activate their alliance networks. These tactics drew unwanted local and international attention to the state’s indiscretions, thus exploiting the regime’s sensitivity to maintaining its image as a reformist source of unity and stability to Jordan. As such, activists’ efforts to produce negative inducements to bargaining were often effective in mitigating repression and producing some concessions.

Illegal labor strikes, marches, and sit-ins, lasting a few hours or even weeks, were the most common forms of SMO escalation, and activists only ceased their disruptive tactics once a high-level government official recognized the protesting participants and initiated a dialogue over their demands. For example, during a sit-in strike by the movement of daily laborers at the lower house of Parliament in April, 2007, disattention by the Parliament compelled the workers to escalate their demands on the street. According to the SMO leader, protesters demanded “to bring down the government [of the prime minister] itself, and we said so because they did not respond to our requests.” The SMO leader then moved the site of the protest the same day to the prime minister’s office in order to seek attention there, and refused
to disband his protest until a deputy minister invited him and his colleagues inside for a
discussion. While a meeting with elites was no guarantee that the movement would get their
desired concessions, this attention reopened a pathway to bargaining, and therefore signaled a
short-term movement success.

If the regime continued to ignore and disattend to activists, or if harsher repression
increased rapidly, activists sought attention and protection from third-party organizations.
First, as previously discussed, the Jordanian regime’s stability and legitimacy depends in part
on the backing of Transjordanian tribes, and the monarchy therefore works to minimize
conflicts with tribal federations. While some tribal elites remain aligned with the government,
activists attested that being affiliated with a powerful tribe could also provide protection for
an individual or a group, because if an activist were detained or abused the tribe might
mobilize in order to protect one of its members. Activists not personally affiliated with
powerful tribal groups also elicited attention and protection by presenting their grievances to
sympathetic tribal elites, who may choose to align themselves with the activist and provide
informal protections for him or her. Because neoliberal reforms and austerity measures have
increased Transjordanian discontent with the regime (Baylouny 2008), tribal elites were often
attributed as important allies of pro-reform organizers.

Local, independent journalists and international media organizations also served as key
allies to and resources for movements. As an antinuclear development activist stated, “[The]
BBC called me last week and they wanted to have an interview . . . and I said no because I was
waiting to see the king. Now I said I am ready.” This NGO activist planned to turn to the
international media as an alternative source of attention, both as a last-resort tactic to punish
the royal court for their disattention, as well as to force the dialogue that had been denied thus
far. Street-level violence, particularly when occurring outside of the capital, also prompted
activist leaders to invite the media to observe strikes or protests. For example, after the daily
laborers’ movement and the striking port workers in Aqaba were attacked and imprisoned by
Darak forces in 2009, a respondent explained that by taking independent Jordanian reporters
and Al Jazeera journalists to the protests, “the Darak couldn’t attack. So we went back to the
strike again.”

International human rights organizations served as a third source of attention and
protection for activists. A women’s NGO used the United Nations to not only hold the regime
accountable for violations against the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of
Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), but also to provide protection for the NGO itself.
An activist recalled:

In 2007, we presented the first shadow report to the CEDAW committee in the UN to show
that the government has signed the treaty but is not applying it. . . . So it is in the monitoring
process [that] we are protecting ourselves, by the UN . . . and this gives us the possibility of
fighting against the government.

INGO connections also provided personal protections. For example, an environmental acti-
vist, concerned that the regime was conspiring to levy dishonorable slander and legal charges
against him, planned on utilizing his contacts with Human Rights Watch and the European
Union’s human rights office for protection. Because INGOs have the power to embarrass
regimes claiming to uphold human rights and democratic principles, their attention to rights
violations can and does pressure the Jordanian regime to alleviate repressive measures.

Lastly, activists attempted to make allies out of enemies, breaking the fragile ties between
the regime and clone groups by convincing the latter to join their struggle on strategic and
moral grounds. For example, when the government attempted to mobilize strikebreakers
against port workers in Aqaba, one of the strikers explained,
We tried to convince [the strikebreakers] that it’s not the right of the employer to replace the striking laborers with others. What will happen if you take our places? One day you will have the same situation! . . . So they responded to us and refused to work also.

In another case, the clone SMO broke with the government after repression increased against the original SMO. As a teacher’s SMO leader recalled, the clone group “saw our struggle.” The respondent continued:

They joined us and came out against the government saying . . . “You’re punishing our colleagues with their livelihood, so we’re not going to stand for this.” That’s why they called me and they apologized for not standing with us before.

By forming alliances with clone groups, SMOs undermined government repression and bolstered protest participation. I argue that the aforementioned tactical interactions between pro-reform activists and state representatives exemplified a dynamic of contained escalation. As repression escalated against activists for breaching “red lines,” activists also escalated their tactics in order to publically shame the regime for its repression. Once the state conceded, activists withdrew and entered into private bargaining with state agents. I argue that this process of contained escalation explains the increasingly public, but nonrevolutionary, character of mobilization during the early Arab Spring period in Jordan.

CONTAINED ESCALATION DURING THE “ARAB SPRING”

As the Arab Spring revolutions spread from Tunisia to Egypt and other countries in early 2011, the regime attempted to avoid the mass disruptions occurring elsewhere and placate the populace by dissolving the government and opening corruption cases against several high-level officials. In addition to publically professing his desire to enact democratic reform, King Abdullah also lifted the public assemblies law in February, thus enabling organizations to hold meetings and protests without requiring the prior approval of the local municipality and routinizing protests in some areas. Established activists across movement sectors noted a shift in the regime’s response to their routine activities during this time. An SMO activist who before the Arab Spring had received calls from the GID urging him to “stand with the king,” attested that by the summer of 2011, “It is very, very strange for me . . . that in spite of the fact that I am writing very, very clear articles against the king and the queen, they are not calling me.” An antinormalization leader also noted that his campaign to publically discredit Jordanian companies doing business in Israel had not recently resulted in threats, slander, or arrests by the security apparatus in comparison with the recent past. The leader of an SMO for veterans’ benefits also reported that repression against him and his colleagues had escalated in 2010 and resulted in a summons to the State Security Court. However, he noted, “What saved us is the revolution in Tunis,” after which the campaign to prosecute these leaders halted.

Movements strategically exploited the government’s fear of a mass revolutionary movement in order to combat disattention. For example, an activist in the teacher’s SMO reported that the Arab Spring prompted the government to break its stalemate with the movement and begin negotiations:

[When] the Arab Spring came about . . . we threatened to join the popular movements. We, for long, made it clear that we’re separate entity and our demands are basically not political, and we demand things that are economic . . . and we weren’t going to join the political situation yet. [Then] we threatened to boycott the elections . . . to try to push the government to submit to our demands. And so the government made the wise decision . . . and accepted that in order to prevent such massive movements or inclusion—as we threatened to [strike] across the
country and join the popular movement—they saw that giving us an association would be the right step for the regime.

This tactical escalation exploited the regime’s vulnerability to pro-democratic reform “frame extension,” which occurs when an SMO extends “the boundaries of its primary framework so as to encompass interests or points of view that are incidental to its primary objectives but of considerable salience” to allies and opponents (Snow et al. 1986: 472). In Jordan’s case, frame extension refers to the shifting of movement rhetoric from issue-specific economic grievances to political grievances weighed against the regime writ large. For example, after an attack by al-Darak against pro-reform protesters in al-Karak on August 5, 2011, protesters regrouped the following day to protest the violence, throwing eggs at a government building and chanting, “We want to throw out the king also!” As one SMO participant recalled, “That was the first protest where the slogans reached the king and asked for the overthrowing.”

On the other hand, any person or group accused of inciting civil strife or “offending His Majesty’s dignity” by invoking revolution (Human Rights Watch 2012b, 2012c) faced harsh repression. For example, the first attempt by the nascent political reform movement to enact a mass, open-ended sit-in resulted in an attack by thugs and al-Darak forces in Amman on March 25, 2011. While activists admitted that this incident succeeded in scaring people from occupying the capital’s streets en masse, by the second half of 2011 every SMO activist—as well as many NGO activists—had participated in protests and considered themselves affiliated with the pro-reform movement in response to the regime’s repression and lack of meaningful reforms.

Harsher repression against individuals and groups became the impetus for smaller-scale protests and sit-ins throughout 2011 and 2012. For example, after several of their colleagues were arrested, an SMO leader from a southern reform faction attested that in May 2011, “we got inside building of the governorate and refused to leave until the detainees were released, or we all get arrested . . . and all put in detention.” These direct actions succeeded in granting the release of their colleagues, though this interviewee and others were later arrested in March 2012. In response, protests quickly escalated once again throughout the country, including the first women-only protest aiming to shame the apparatus into releasing the activists. A representative of the women’s demonstration issued a public challenge to the GID, stating, “[I]f security forces are willing to arrest and beat their brothers for demanding democracy and basic freedoms, they will have to be willing to arrest and beat their mothers, sisters, and daughters too” (Ahlul Bayt News Agency 2012). And in response to the anonymous stabbings of two bloggers in January and February of 2012, SMOs from across the kingdom initiated protests with the purpose of sending “the message to security services and all the forces in the kingdom that are pushing against reform that you may stab us, but you cannot kill our demands” (Luck 2012).

These confrontational demonstrations protesting specific cases of repression spiked repeatedly until the regime responded. When street-level repression became a highly publicized event, the government often attempted to make the “right combination of reciprocal noises” (Dahl 1956: 146) in order restore its reputation as tolerant. For example, the beating of journalists and peaceful protesters during a demonstration in Amman on July 15, 2011, which was widely reported on by the international media, resulted in an apology from the Public Security Directorate, promises of compensation to journalists, and the arrests of four policemen. However, the regime also denied any responsibility for inciting attacks by nonuniformed regime sympathizers and agents, and used these ensuing street battles as an excuse for withholding broader democratic reforms. A respondent from the popular movement of al-Tafilah reported that during the king’s visit to his city, plain-clothed Darak forces engaged in sabotage, setting fires and attacking people on the streets. Immediately afterwards, “there was news leaked to the AFP, the French news agency . . . by a higher official in the
government that [we] were ‘offending’ the king, and ‘look at these guys who demand democracy while creating disruptions—they don’t deserve democracy.’”

Illiberal regimes under pressure to reform often use surrogates to enact repression, which allows them to damage opposition movements while denying responsibility for ensuing disruptions and violence (Kirschke 2000). But despite the fact that violence by thugs allowed the regime to repress while blaming protesters for creating instability, the regime’s fear of Transjordanian mobilization was also cited by SMO activists as an important reason why more extreme methods of repression were less frequently wielded against them in the Arab Spring period. While democratic reforms are often at odds with the tribal patronage system, the respondents were unanimous in their belief that, as one interviewee reported, “the good aspect of the tribes is that the tribes are protecting the popular movement. . . . They stand as a shield.” Another SMO respondent attested that the regime could not now arrest him, as this would quickly mobilize his entire tribe; and another reported that, for the same reason, he had not experienced physical assault while imprisoned in recent years. As such, tribal patronage ties raised the costs of repression, inhibiting the regime from routinely instigating physical violence, mass imprisonment, or murder against reformers.

In sum, the public and confrontational but nonrevolutionary character of nascent Arab Spring mobilizations in Jordan reflects a continuation of—rather than a break from—the contained escalation characterizing the preceding period. The Arab Spring (at least temporarily) reduced some routine forms of repression and compelled the regime to accommodate public protest so long as it did not invoke the familiar methods or refrains of neighboring revolutions—e.g., mass sit-ins and slogans calling for the fall of the regime. While increases in harsh repression have temporarily sparked calls for the fall of the regime on the street since 2011, as long as the regime prioritizes social stability over retaining power at all costs—the latter approach exemplified by the autocratic regimes of Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi and Syria’s Bashar al-Assad—harsher repression will be used sparingly. This does not mean, however, that the regime does not repress activists harshly. Activists still face risks and penalties for crossing red lines, and must continuously work to remind the regime that their tolerance for harsher repression is low.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Although scholars have made important progress in understanding the effects of repression on mobilization, few studies have empirically substantiated the repertoires of state repression, the corresponding adaptations of activists, and the ensuing chess-like interactions that produce broader patterns of contention (McAdam 1983). In order to address these shortcomings, I analyzed the accounts of leaders and participants in reform-oriented organizations in Jordan, a “liberalized” authoritarian state, in order to derive a grounded typology of repression. I find that activists transformed “softer” forms of outreach by the GID and state representatives into opportunities to present their grievances, affirm their legitimacy, and dialogically challenge state agents. “Harder” repressive forms spurred activists to initiate protests and activate their alliance networks with tribes, the media, and international NGOs in order to pressure the state into rescinding repression. Activists then gained some protections and leverage by exploiting the government’s sensitivity to “naming and shaming” (Haftner-Burton and Tsutsui 2007). Once officials rescinded harsher repression and re-entered into bargaining, activists also disengaged and negotiated with their targets. As such, I argue that the tactical interactions between states and challengers in Jordan’s “liberalized” period exemplified a process of contained escalation, which explains, at least in part, why reform movements did not seek the regime’s overthrow through 2013.

This analysis advances understanding of repression’s effects on mobilization in several ways. First, the findings support McAdam’s (1983) argument that the mechanism driving
successful negative inducements to bargaining are activists’ strategic adaptations that publicize repression and embarrass image-conscious regimes. For though authorities may revert to force under certain conditions (Earl and Soule 2006; Soule and Davenport 2009), reactions by the security apparatus to public displays of dissent must appear reasonable (della Porta 1997). Otherwise, officials risk being perceived as illegitimate and prompt further backlash (Opp and Roehl 1990). However, this dynamic is not limited to Western states. In Jordan, as is also the case in democratic contexts, activists rely heavily on third parties and the media to indirectly impose limits on social control measures (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1983; Lipsky 1968; Schattschneider 1960; Wisler and Giugni 1999).

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that activists do not only or most importantly adjust the frequency or size of their public protests in response to physical coercion. On the contrary, Jordanian activists transformed “softer” repression into opportunities to engage with and “talk back” to officials and the GID, and thus valued outreach as a two-way communication mechanism. Rather than undermining their advocacy efforts, private adaptations to softer repressive forms diminished their fear of the formidable intelligence apparatus and emboldened them to make assertive claims. So while illiberal regimes are typically conceived of as “closed” and uniformly hostile to dissenters, this imagery neglects the informal dialogues and negotiations routinely taking place between officials and activists. On the other hand, when challengers perceived that they were being purposefully ignored through “disattention,” for example, this was considered a relatively harsh action and prompted escalation. Escalation was initiated by Jordanian reformers in response to any type of repression that signaled a deprivation of their right and ability to work for reform-oriented advocacy. Because scholars typically pick and choose what constitutes repression (Earl 2011), these findings emphasize the importance of considering what activists themselves perceive to be egregious violations.

As previous studies of movement escalation have shown, the existence of formal and informal pathways to bargaining have to result in some meaningful concessions over time, lest the regime be perceived as lacking the will or capacity to bargain in good faith (Inclán 2008). As discussed above, regimes prompt backlash and escalation when their repressive responses are perceived as illegitimate; after repression produces antigovernment movements, limited concessions are unlikely to produce bargaining (Rasler 1996). I demonstrate that because street-level violence has been relatively rare in Jordan and the regime has granted some general and movement-specific concessions, activists perceived that the regime is capable of reform—even though they were often frustrated with the pace of reform—because they retained and created pathways for bargaining through private and public tactical adaptations. Thus, the regime continued to be perceived as a legitimate bargaining partner, even though activists viewed particular groups or individuals within the system to be corrupt or otherwise illegitimate. For these reasons, while these movements sporadically called for the fall of the regime on the street, movement frames did not permanently shift from reform to revolution during the initial Arab Spring period, and to date the conflict has remained contained.

While this study is limited by its focus on one country, there is little reason to suggest that the process of contained escalation is unique to Jordan. Drawing inductively from this case, I expect that illiberal regimes seeking to maintain authoritarian power, a reputation as liberalizing, and street-level stability will react to reform-oriented dissent in a similar fashion. While more empirical research is needed to make definitive statements about where the contained escalation dynamic may be found elsewhere—particularly in light of how little research has been done on routine activism and repression in illiberal states—studies of recent protest movements in China show that state officials often accommodate, rather than crackdown on, protest (Chen 2012; Lee and Zhang 2013; Su and He 2010). Public demonstrations are an effective tactic in producing concessions due to national policies promoting street-level peace and stability; collective actors threaten the veneer of social harmony simply by gathering in a public place to express their grievances (Chen 2012), which
forces officials to act as “firefighters” in order to contain the sparks of dissent without the use of delegitimizing violence (Su and He 2010: 169). In China, as in Jordan, the regime’s emphasis on preserving social stability as a means to survival and legitimacy leads to a significant degree of face-to-face interactions and negotiations between challengers and state agents, and to the willingness of the state to turn confrontation into bargaining (Lee and Zhang 2013: 1486). In both contexts, the tactical interactions occurring between protesters and state officials created a “sustained bargaining relationship” as long as challengers did not call for the overthrow of the political system (Chen 2012: 4). Because these contained escalations cannot be accurately characterized as either the successful suppression of mobilization or as transgressive escalation by protesters (O’Brien 2003), conceptualizing repression’s effects as deterrence or escalation misapprehends these nuanced dynamics of contention.

In light of the importance of regime sensitivity to public shaming as the key mechanism by which contained escalation is produced, I suggest that further research identify the factors driving regimes’ avoidance of negative publicity across both democratic and nondemocratic states. Jordan may be uniquely sensitive in the Middle Eastern region due to the widespread penetration of INGOs and media, the political power of tribal constituencies, its dependence on aid-granting countries, and its geographical positioning between antagonistic states, among other factors. Because the histories and political pressures facing Jordan and other sensitized countries such as China vary, studies of state-challenger interactions should therefore analyze the various “causal recipes” producing this sensitivity (Ragin 2008).

In addition, while this study only considers the repression facing reform-oriented activists, it is clear that not all contenders are likely to be perceived as legitimate bargaining partners by the regime. When activists take the regime at its word—for example, that the People’s Republic of China represents workers, or that the Hashemite monarchy is the protector of all Jordanians—dissenters create leverage by demanding what they are “owed” as constituents, even though they do not possess fuller civil and political rights (O’Brien 2001, 2003). Conversely, certain groups are not viewed by regimes as constituents—and because some challengers may correspondingly view a given regime as an illegitimate occupier—semiauthoritarian states are not likely to bargain with all groups: Salafis in Jordan (Wiktorowicz 2001) and Tibetans in China (Chen 2012), for example. This suggests that the state’s repressive strategies will vary significantly depending on whether protesting groups are considered as constituencies or outsider threats (Ron 2000).25 How identities are wielded tactically on both sides in order to legitimize repression or dissent is a key dynamic requiring further scrutiny.

Lastly, I argue that we will not adequately understand the character and degree of episodic disruptions if the normative and less public tactical interactions between states and organized challengers preceding crisis periods are ignored (Johnston 2006). Based on this study, I strongly suspect that analyzing these dynamics will help scholars explain the vastly differential outcomes between states during the Arab Spring. For example, Jordanian activists frequently highlighted important differences between routine repressive practices at home and in neighboring Syria, which witnessed an unprecedented escalation of violence in 2011 and beyond. As one NGO director described, “They can’t arrest you [in Jordan] for like two or three years without reasons. . . . They can’t, like in Syria for example, arrest your family if you do not [submit]. So there is a big difference between this system and nearby systems. Here there is some compromising at all levels.” Another respondent who had previously lived in Syria affirmed that—unlike in Jordan—there “you can’t even challenge a policeman!” Despite the fact that both regimes are often labeled as authoritarian, this suggests that the contexts in which the Arab Spring protests emerged differed drastically, and that the two regimes could hardly be less similar in the way they respond to challengers. Accounting for the differences between regimes’ routine coercive practices and differential “styles” of repression (Boudreau 2004), therefore, is essential to explaining movements’ tactical
adaptations over time and the conditions under which state-challenger interactions produce bargaining or escalated conflict.

NOTES

1 Political parties were later legalized in 1992.

2 Sectarian battles between Jordanians and Palestinians, particularly the civil war between the Hashemite regime and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1970-71, posed a significant threat to the monarchy’s survival and legitimacy. This conflict resulted in the infamous “Black September” of 1970 and the expulsion of many Palestinians from Jordan, as well as from positions in the military and the government. After liberalization, elections rules were adjusted to discriminate against Palestinian-dominated regions and the Muslim Brotherhood’s political party, the Islamic Action Front, by minimizing their proportional representation in government.

3 The signing of the Israel-Jordan Treaty of Peace, or the Wadi Arabah Treaty, in 1994 was an unpopular move, and compelled the regime to further restrict oppositional mobilization (Ryan and Schwedler 2004). Transjordanian demands on behalf of Palestinians are fiercely contested, as many argue that Palestinian liberation and the right of return hinges on the resending of Jordanian citizenship from Jordanian-Palestinians. The unofficial but widely acknowledged demographic imbalance between Jordanian-Palestinians and Jordanian-Jordanians is a sore subject for tribes and nationalists, who believe that Israel is purposefully dumping Palestinians in their territory—with the full complicity of King Abdullah—in order to transform Jordan into the “alternative homeland” (al-Watan al-Badil) for Palestinians and to undermine the ethnically-Jordanian composition of the nation-state.

4 For example, the 1998 Press and Publications Law “contains numerous content restrictions, criminalizing defamation including libel and slander, including against entities that are not people such as government institutions, symbols, and religions. These laws make violations a criminal offense carrying prison terms” (Human Rights Watch 2012a). Additionally, a 2001 provisional law further stipulated that when any organization planned a gathering of any kind, organizers were required to submit the activity for approval to the local municipality.

5 This study uses the 2011 Library of Congress transliteration guide for all Arabic to English translations while omitting diacritical marks for simplicity (http://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpso/roman.html). For example, the Intelligence service or GID in Jordan, مخابرات ملكية, is written here as the Mukhabarat or al-Mukhabarat, rather than al-Mukhābarāt.

6 Red lines in Jordan are referred to as takhṭat al-khutut al-himra’a (تخطيط الخطوط الحمراء) in the post-September 11, 2001 international war on terror, in addition to a series of hotel bombings in ‘Amman in 2005, further justified punitive measures against suspects accused of threatening state security (Warrick 2009: 15).

7 The post-September 11, 2001 international war on terror, in addition to a series of hotel bombings and a 2005 terrorist plot, further justified punitive measures against suspects accused of threatening state security (Warrick 2009: 15).

8 SMOs may, of course, range on a continuum between more and less acceptable to state authorities. For the sake of consistency, this analysis focuses on reform-oriented SMOs, rather than violent or militant ones. The latter are more likely to organize through informal social networks to escape state oversight (Wiktowicz 2001) and be more harshly repressed. In addition, while rumored to exist, I was not able to gain access to any SMOs dedicated specifically to bolstering the status of Palestinians in Jordan. Due to Jordan’s history of repression against the PLO and the ongoing war on terror, these groups are likely to remain underground. The analysis of state repression against underground groups, as such, is beyond the scope of this study.

9 SMOs are defined here as collectivities that organize in order to assert claims and demands with some degree of temporal continuity (Cress and Snow 1996) but are not formally registered as legal organizations by the state. NGOs are national or local organizations formally registered with the Jordanian government as legal organizations (see also endnote 14). These groups advocate for refugees, migrant workers, election monitoring, press freedoms, youth empowerment, juvenile justice reform, and women’s rights, and they train the security apparatus on human rights law, among other issues. INGOs are organizations that are part of an international network originating outside of Jordan, and are also legally recognized by the Jordanian government; they generally focus on bolstering the capacity of local NGOs and democratic development. The government-founded NGOs in this study were dedicated to human rights monitoring, youth empowerment, and volunteerism.

10 In agreement with the Internal Review Board protocol for this study (HS# 2011-8241, University of California, Irvine), all interviewees remain anonymous.

11 Arabic translations of interview material were later reviewed and revised by the author, who has some Arabic language capability, and by the interpreters assisting with the data collection in order to ensure accuracy and consistency.

12 Accounts of private confrontations with state agents were more difficult to verify than public confrontations, for obvious reasons. However, I worked to minimize recall bias and account fabrication in several ways. First, I gauged the consistency of activists’ accounts within and between interviews. Second, I employed a strategy of outsider skepticism, asking questions such as “how was it possible for you to respond to the Intelligence in such a way, given the risks?” This strategy prompted subjects to justify the plausibility of their recollections, the logic and reasoning behind their actions, the emotional tone of the interaction with the state agent(s), and the consequences of the interaction. Third, I asked activists about the plausibility of others’ stories (while keeping these stories anonymous), which reaffirmed emergent patterns in the data and prompted them to elaborate in detail to the interviewer-outsider,
let me explain to you how things work here in Jordan. Importantly, private, dialogic challenges to the state were described by consistency across the NGO/SMO interview sample by men and women of different ages and organizational affiliations, rather than by a few "braggarts." I also stress that activists were forthright about instances in which they were not brave or were unsuccessful in their encounters with the state—as such, accounts detailed their successes, challenges, and defeats.

1 For example, I was referred multiple times to the same SMOs due to the prominence of their activism before and during the Arab Spring period. This does not mean, however, that activists only referred their like-minded friends. On multiple occasions, I was referred to activists by interviewees who expressed disdain or disagreement for the others' ideologies or strategies; however, my respondents frequently insisted that I speak to these individuals because of their widely-known standings as active reformers.

16 I argue here that censorship and resource deprivation overlap to comprise one general type of repression. For example, censoring NGO programs, the types of funding they can use, or limiting the people who can participate in a given program through activist "weeding" is also a form of resource deprivation. Likewise, depriving an SMO of electronic resources, such as their website or Facebook account, is also a type of censorship.

19 Because state repression may be applied differently to central and peripheral geographical regions (Ron 2003), I analyzed the data with an eye towards whether repression and contention varied for those living and working outside of ‘Amman and those within. Based on my analysis, activists’ accounts did not suggest that repression against reform-oriented activists and their corresponding tactical adaptations varied significantly according to one’s geographical base. However, I did find that activists who were geographically situated outside of the capital were at a disadvantage when working to publicize repression because they were more isolated from media attention. As such, they invited journalists to witness their protests, or held protests in the capital. Because Jordan is a small country (slightly smaller than the U.S. state of Indiana) my respondents living and working in the governorates frequently traveled to ‘Amman for this purpose.

20 The “big hall” refers to the Association Complex in Amman where the Antinormalization Coalition holds meetings and gatherings open to the public.

21 One routinized protest site is the al-Husseini mosque in downtown Amman, where the Muslim Brotherhood routinely led protests on Fridays throughout 2011.

22 Walker (1963) refers to these as material versus status grievances, respectively. In a parallel case, an SMO for imams advocating for salary raises and the right to form an association “indicated that after months of solo sit-ins” and subsequent disattention by the government, “the clerics planned to merge their cause with the country’s 17-month-old pro-reform movement” in June 2012 (Islam Web 2012).

23 As reported by Al Jazeera English, “Journalists were promised compensation and four policemen were arrested for suspicion of being involved in the July 15 attacks. Two pro-reform protests…and took place after this accident and ended peacefully, in a clear attempt by the authorities to placate the people and improve the tarnished image of Jordan’s security authorities” (El-Shamayleh 2011).

24 Other shocks, such as economic perturbations, have also temporarily escalated calls for the fall of the regime. For example, in November, 2012, protests broke out in ‘Amman after the government announced that it would end fuel subsidies.

25 Though the Jordanian regime attempted to slander reformers as foreign threats, their accusations often backfired, prompting mobilization and damaging the state’s credibility. For example, according to one SMO participant, the slander of his honorable colleague “made us more powerful, rather than weaker” because the slander was so obviously concocted in order to bring a case against the activist in the State Security Court.
REFERENCES


Repression, Response, and Contained Escalation


