

The Coup Taboo: Assessing a Global Anti-Coup Norm and Its Effects in Egypt and Turkey

Abstract

Is there a normative proscription (a *coup taboo*) against military interventions into civilian political affairs? Ideational factors are widely recognized in research on coup politics, but soldiers are assigned outsized influence due to their possession of weapons. Coup perpetrators' material sources of power, however, cannot explain why successful coup-makers, such as Egypt's General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, seek affirmation from domestic and international audiences that their power seizures are not coup-like. While researchers have extensively studied coup conspirators' need for legitimacy, no study has situated this mandate within a broader framework of stigmatized coup politics. This essay demonstrates the existence of a global *coup taboo*—a normative prohibition against coups d'état. Using a Most Different Systems Design (MDS), I find that domestic and international actors displayed high levels of “concordance” (i.e., they referred to and agreed upon) an anti-coup norm in Egypt (July 2013) and Turkey (July 2016). Research for the case studies is based on a small number of interviews with Egyptians (conducted virtually, June-October 2020); a limited amount of photographic evidence from a trip to Egypt in July 2013; as well as secondary sources in English and Arabic.

If Egyptian General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi controlled an arsenal and was strapped with Persian Gulf cash after seizing power in July 2013, then why did he fret so much about the “coup” label? While ideational factors are widely recognized in research on coup politics, soldiers are assigned outsized influence due to their possession of weapons.¹ For instance, in the 1960s the London *Times* wrote of Iraqi coups that,

The armed forces are the sole dispensers of revolution nowadays, simply *because they have the arms*. Only a man with a gun can overthrow one who came to power with a gun.... [T]he civilian, although they are his affairs that are at stake, *has practically no voice at all*.²

Coup perpetrators’ material sources of power, however, cannot explain why a successful coup-maker like Sisi would seek affirmation from domestic and international audiences that his were not coup-like. Moreover, it cannot explain negative reactions from international officials in the wake of coups d’état.

While researchers have extensively studied coup conspirators’ need for legitimacy, no study has situated this mandate within a broader framework of stigmatized coup politics. Following Ben-Josef Hirsch and Jennifer Dixon, this essay uses “concordance,”³ i.e., the extent to which political agents “refer to and accept”⁴ an idea as normatively appropriate, to probe the existence of a global *coup taboo*—a normative prohibition against coups d’état. The *coup taboo* is observable after both successful and failed coup attempts. Using a Most Different Systems Design (MDS), I find that domestic and international actors displayed high concordance after a successful coup in Egypt (July 2013) and a failed attempt in Turkey (July 2016). I measure concordance with statements from public officials at the domestic and global levels. Research for the case studies is based on a limited number of interviews with Egyptians (conducted virtually, June-October 2020); photographic

evidence and field observations from a brief trip to Egypt in July 2013; as well as secondary sources in English and Arabic.

The case studies reveal novel insights about coup politics. The essay puts a name to an understudied but widely recognized phenomenon—the *coup taboo*—and explains how this phenomenon affects political behavior after both successful and failed coups. In the event of *failed* coups, the taboo’s shaming effect allows autocrats, like Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to justify brutal repression of the opposition, rights abuses, and entrenchment of authoritarian rule. The stigma surrounding coups forces *successful* coup-makers to re-frame their actions as something more justifiable. This makes coup-detection more difficult by conflating coups and revolution, as well as by confusing pro-democracy activists. Some Egyptian protesters, for instance, did not realize they were supporting a coup in Egypt in July 2013 until it was too late.⁵ The logic of the *coup taboo* offers an analytical tool with which to inculcate norms of democratic civilian control through coup-detection, a vocabulary to quickly spot and call out this normative transgression.

The *coup taboo* contributes to several research programs. First, it speaks to studies on civilian involvement in coups d’état,⁶ lending additional support to the contention that power does not necessarily hinge on who has guns or money, but also on ideational sources of authority. Second, the study adds to several conversations about international norms, such as research on global taboos⁷; the meaning of normative change through contestation and violation⁸; and norm entrepreneurship vis-à-vis anti-coup norms.⁹ The following section discusses how the coup taboo fits within these research traditions. The literature

review is then followed by a theoretical discussion of the *coup taboo*, an articulation of the research design, and case treatments of Egypt and Turkey.

Coups and Taboos

The *coup taboo* adds to two existing areas of scholarly inquiry: (1) anti-coup norms and (2) international taboos. First, despite Alfred Stepan's call to devote volumes to the study of the inculcation of a norm against coups,¹⁰ scholars have only recently begun systematically studying the emergence of anti-coup norms, especially in African IOs.¹¹ Research on the African Union's (AU) effort to prevent coups is tied to rising expectations about democratization in Africa specifically and the international system more broadly. In the context of these rising expectations, normative entrepreneurs in the AU sought to inculcate a norm against unconstitutional changes of government (UCGs), including coups d'état. This research tends toward empirical tests of the norm's institutionalization and strength against alternative explanations for the overall reduction in coup incidents worldwide.¹² Adding to this literature, the *coup taboo* is the first to systematically probe the existence of an *informal* anti-coup norm that is *global* in reach. Moreover, the study improves our understanding of how political actors navigate normative environments in which coup attempts occur, rather than assess norm strength or institutionalization in IGOs.

Second, this research contributes to a large literature on global taboos, i.e., normative prohibitions against socially undesirable and dangerous activities.¹³ Researchers have studied a wide variety of "taboos," including states' nuclear use (the "nuclear taboo"), torture (the "torture taboo"); Islamists' abuse of women; the targeting of civilians in conflict; targeted killings or assassinations; and anti-corruption.¹⁴

Jamal Barnes' research on the United States' post-9/11 violation of the "torture taboo" is especially relevant. Barnes argues that the United States' justifications for violating the anti-torture norm, as well as the global response to the transgression, paradoxically demonstrated its strength. "It is well known that violations of norms do not necessarily mean they do not matter," Barnes writes. "Further questions need to be asked to assess the robustness of a norm: what was the domestic and international response to US torture? What justifications were given for its use? Was torture denied and carried out in secret or openly justified as the right thing to do?"¹⁵ Likewise, when coup perpetrators re-frame their actions as non-coup-like, they are reassuring domestic and international audiences that they respect the norm against coups.

The Coup Taboo

Those tasked with managing the relationship between soldiers and civilians are familiar with the powerful normative boundary that reserves political decision-making for civilians and military decision-making for officers. Since at least the transfer of society's weaponry from private to public hands—i.e., the development of modern states and their militaries¹⁶—unarmed actors have been propagating the powerful idea that armed and unarmed agents should be confined to pre-designated spheres. They have created a *coup taboo*, or a normative proscription against the violent and potentially deadly effects of military takeovers. Although students of civil-military relations have not studied the origins of this norm or how unarmed public agents reinforce it, they have provided a vast array of literature on the "legitimacy" of coups and military rule.

Theorists generally agree that soldiers must legitimize armed takeovers. Juntas cannot rely solely on force.¹⁷ Samuel Finer argued that “the threat of physical compulsion is not an efficient, i.e. an economical, way of securing obedience.”¹⁸ “A military junta legitimizes itself,” Finer wrote, “in order to slam the door of morality in its challengers’ face.”¹⁹ Seconding this claim, Eleizer Be’eri points out that Middle East coup perpetrators have attempted to prevent follow-up coups by giving “their regimes the appearance of civilian rule.”²⁰ Eric Nordlinger observed that officers with motive to intervene will be hesitant to stage coups unless their target regime is experiencing a legitimacy crisis, which paves the way for coup-makers.²¹ “The most opportune moment for an intervention,” echoed Staffan Wiking, “is when the level of confidence in the civilian institutions is low at the same time as the armed forces are enjoying a degree of popularity.”²² Legitimizing coups becomes easier, Wiking says, “when the masses support the coup,” because the “revolutionary element” is not “limited to the rhetoric of the coupmakers.”²³

What is missing from the literature on coups and legitimacy is that it is the existence of a *coup taboo* that exacts from soldiers some legitimate justification for their entrance into politics. This anti-coup norm is the weapon which civilians wield in their dealings with soldiers. Therefore, in order to intervene in politics, in most cases, soldiers need to convince some segment of the civilian elite and/or masses to suspend their disapproval of this normative transgression. To put it differently, they need *civilians* to undermine the norm against coups. Samuel Finer inquired in one of the earliest studies of coups d’état: why would organized purveyors of violence ever obey civilian masters?²⁴ “Simply put,” asks Milan Svobik, “why is it that in some countries, those with guns obey those without guns?”²⁵ Indeed, in the absence of a *coup taboo*, we would expect armed agents of the state

to be in charge. Even if they seized power in a coup, soldiers cannot undermine the anti-coup norm; they are doing what is expected. What would undermine the *coup taboo* is if civilians failed to condemn, or applauded, a coup.

Despite widespread recognition that civilians involve themselves in coup politics,²⁶ researchers and policy-makers have overwhelmingly viewed civil-military relations “through the lens of the liberal-democratic principle that *elected civilian officials must be supreme over the military.*”²⁷ Assuming that civilians agree that soldiers belong in the barracks precludes us from imagining any scenario in which civilians desire another role for soldiers. The result of this thinking is that, where we see civilians take a lead role in legitimizing coups d’état, observers portray them either as the victims of ambitious officers or mistake their actions as revolutionary. In fact, as the literature acknowledges, civilians offer soldiers the opportunity to seize power in coups. The *coup taboo* improves our understanding of this process by outlining the ideational structures involved in coup politics, especially by demonstrating the importance of ideas vis-à-vis arms.

In coup-prone states, civilians are said to lack agency because they lack guns, but they possess ideational sources of authority that assist their military allies in their effort to re-frame coups in order to bring their behavior into normative alignment. Since coups are the product of motive and *opportunity*,²⁸ this is an important asset for soldiers who may be attempting a coup. Although rarely articulated explicitly, this is plain to researchers of civilian support for and resistance to coups.²⁹ There are theoretical reasons why civilian elites are well-suited for coup politics, as well as to inculcate anti-coup norms. Civilians possess greater social capital than unknown generals (there are notable exceptions, like Gamal Abdel Nasser and Charles De Gaulle). Civilian elites possess organizational (e.g.,

party-building), material (e.g., wealth, patronage, communications networks), and public office.³⁰ Politicians can mobilize crowds and inspire bureaucrats to resist coup attempts,³¹ like Charles De Gaulle did in the 1960s. While Naunihal Singh, a detractor, argues that coup perpetrators must project strength, civil resistance may be able to rupture the façade of authority that conspirators must portray during critical moments of a coup operation.³²

Researchers generally agree that, because coups exact legitimacy, civilian support factors into the coup calculations of military officers. Edward Luttwak’s coup how-to teaches perpetrators to view civilians as potential supporters or opponents to their coup designs.³³ “Plotters who are disposed to attempt a coup,” Powell writes, “will evaluate their ability to carry out the effort before acting.”³⁴ Likewise, Seligson and Carrión caution potential coup plotters to “consider” their popular support.³⁵ As an illustrative example, British Ambassador Archibald Clark Kerr estimated that without the support of politician Hikmat Suleiman and his *Ahali* (People) group, “*who could carry with them a large volume of public opinion,*” Iraqi General Bakr al-Sidqi could not have successfully executed a coup in Baghdad in 1936.³⁶

Research Design

In order to demonstrate the presence of the *coup taboo*, I use “concordance,”³⁷ which measures consistency and agreement with a norm, which is defined as a consensus-based expectation within society about socially appropriate conduct that “proscribe certain activities and legitimate others.”³⁸ If there is a *coup taboo*, as I argue, we should see (1) coup perpetrators re-framing their actions as something more justifiable than a “coup” (e.g., “revolution,” “removing the corrupt regime,” “acting on behalf of the streets,” “carrying

out the will of the people”); (2) domestic opponents of a coup referring to the anti-coup norm and condemning the coup; and (3) international officials issuing harsh statements about the transgression, submitting critical reports, and re-framing the coup if supportive of regime change. If there is no *coup taboo* then after a coup attempt we should see none or very few mentions of the anti-coup norm; no attempt to justify or re-frame the event; a lack of concern for a given incident; or flagrant disregard for the norm, such as issuing supportive statements for the new regime with no mention of how it ascended to power.

The case studies demonstrate that actors are motivated by “value-rationality,” or a “logic of appropriateness,” meaning that ideas, in this case the *coup taboo*, “play an autonomous or substantive role in explaining outcomes.”³⁹ Throughout the case treatments, I note wherever possible how value-rationality better explains behavior than instrumental rationality. Using statements from both domestic and international actors is useful in this regard. International reactions offer additional leverage because one might otherwise argue that local actors are instrumentally trying to please western, democratic powers. As Hirsch and Dixon put it, “assessing norm strength at the international level overcomes the inconsistencies in statelevel behavior.”⁴⁰

Following Tannenwald, the essay employs “constitutive analysis” in tandem with causal explanation, a strategy well-suited for asking, “What are the [causal] effects of constitutive ‘stuff?’” In other words, the “ideational structure” of the anti-coup norm serves as the study’s independent variable.⁴¹ With this in mind, I selected cases using the logic of a Most Different Systems Design (MDSD), choosing two very different cases—differing even in the success/failure of coup operations—with a common study outcome (domestic and international actors’ behavior following coup attempts). This offers leverage when

assessing the presence of the *coup taboo* because “differences cannot explain similarities.”⁴² Therefore, if all actors demonstrate “concordance” with an anti-coup norm, then we can have high confidence that the *coup taboo* is present.

Normative Effects. After assessing “constitutive” effects of norms, each case study ends with a discussion of “permissive” and “regulative” normative effects.⁴³ *Regulative* normative effects constrain social agents’ behavior within already existing normative and formal institutional frameworks. The main regulative effect of the *coup taboo* is the prohibition of military coups d’état, which forces actors to justify and legitimate their proscribed behavior. As Hirsch and Dixon point out, norms are *not* “aggregations of practices,” thus the mere fact of coups does not suggest the absence of a *coup taboo*. Robust norms, they write, “are violated on occasion, and other norms are regularly violated to some extent.”⁴⁴ In short, the *coup taboo* regulates how perpetrators understand and portray their actions.

Permissive normative effects—or unintended consequences of constitutive norms, especially taboos—focus our attention on the specific prohibition in question and thereby “selectively divert our normative gaze” away from other social consequences.⁴⁵ The *coup taboo* has at least three permissive effects. First, the stigma surrounding coups can be used as a weapon against political opponents. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, for instance, justified a brutal crackdown, which violated human rights, after the failed coup in July 2016. Likewise, invoking the *coup* label can be used to disparage political opponents, as when former President Donald Trump Tweeted a claim by *Fox News* that discussions about invoking the 25th Amendment amounted to an “illegal” and “treasonous”

coup attempt.⁴⁶ Second, the taboo has become associated with authoritarianism, backwardness, lawlessness, and incivility, as in branding post-coup regimes as unsuitable for membership in the international community. This is similar to how the nuclear taboo is embedded in a wider “civilizational” discourse.⁴⁷ Alan Dershowitz added a “civilizational” dimension to the 25th Amendment affair by asserting, in agreement with *Fox News* host Tucker Carlson, that discussing its use was the stuff of “third-world countries.”⁴⁸ Coup-makers in both Egypt (July 2013) and Turkey (July 2016) used Washington’s post-9/11 anti-terror (associated with illegality) norms, respectively labeling the Muslim Brotherhood and Gülenists as terrorists.

Third, the *coup taboo*’s specific prohibition of “coups” has, at least in the Middle East, produced a parallel normative framework which allows coup perpetrators to seize power while portraying their actions as non-coup-like. In reference to Tunisia’s July-August 2013 crisis, a businessperson privy to negotiations between the opposition and government said,

The army should play a role in crises but *not in taking power*. I worked with a lot of the opposition and I spoke with many of them, and they wanted a change of the regime, but *not a change from a civil one to a military one.... Yes, the military would have helped to change the government to a new civil government. But Tunisia has never ever had a military regime. We are a civil country.*⁴⁹

Yet if the army had removed the opposition’s opponent, the Islamist *al-Nahdha* party, then this would have constituted a military intervention, i.e., the threat of violence to weigh-in on the question of who exercises executive authority and who decides who exercises executive authority.⁵⁰

Disguising a Coup as Revolution in Egypt, July 2013

Members of Egypt's ancien régime had by 2013 encircled Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi and begun to legitimate the idea that power should be negotiated with weapons. Businesspersons and politicians had declared war on Morsi's presidency by intentionally fueling a legitimacy crisis by inciting street violence and manipulating the Egyptian economy.⁵¹ This movement led a months-long process to legitimate the eventual coup of July 3, 2013. Beginning in February 2013, the Ministry of Interior led a rapprochement with the military leadership, steadily convincing the officers to treat Muslim Brothers as terrorists. The Interior's General Intelligence Service, meanwhile, encouraged angry young *Kefaya* (Enough) activists to hit the streets. In April 2013, six weeks later, Mahmoud Badr, Moheb Doss, Walid el-Masry, Mohammed Abdel Aziz, and Hassan Shahin organized *Tamarod* (Rebel), which circulated a petition demanding Morsi's resignation. Media moguls created an echo chamber of dehumanization against the Brotherhood and secretly funded *Tamarod*.⁵² Members of the Supreme Constitutional Court supported the movement, as did political parties of all stripes (e.g., liberal, Salafi, Arab nationalist, Trotskyist), as well as Egypt's major labor unions, the Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II, and the Grand Sheikh of *al-Azhar* Ahmed al-Tayyeb.⁵³

Figure 1 offers an example of the coup movement's legitimation techniques. A poster representing the elite-funded and pro-coup *Tamarod* reads, "Get out [top]. The people want the fall of the Brotherhood [Bottom]."

Three *Tamarod* co-founders were directly enlisted in the conspiracy. Moheb Doss admitted frankly in July 2013 that Badr, Abdel Aziz, and Shahin were "under the direct guidance of Egyptian army and intelligence officials."⁵⁴ Just prior to General Sisi's June



Figure 1. Photo captured by author in Cairo, July 2013.

25 ultimatum to President Morsi, Badr surprised and contradicted internal discussions of *Tamarod's* leadership when at a press conference he repeatedly called on the Egyptian public to support Sisi and the army. On July 3, with tanks occupying Cairo and helicopters overhead, Badr veered from *Tamarod's* carefully scripted remarks to request, in front of Tahrir Square's crowds, that the army arrest and remove Morsi from the presidential palace, to protect Egyptians from terrorists.⁵⁵ Civilian elites "didn't name it [a coup]," but supported the regime. "They would say, 'It's the protector,' 'It's our best institution,' and, 'We have stability. It's better than being Syria and Iraq.'"⁵⁶ "For them [economic elites] the security services were their best friend," a liberal party member reflected. "It was a win-win. They were not forced to cooperate with the security services. They would always

use the word ‘stability,’ *al-istiqrar*. The media messaged, ‘*istiqrar, istiqrar, istiqrar.*’ They would say stability is good for business, tourism, and income.”⁵⁷

Efforts to legitimize the coup were not lost on opponents of the coup. Liberal politician and academic Amr Hamzawi wrote in *Al-Sharouk* that Egypt’s liberal elite rushed into an “unconditional alliance with the military establishment during moments of conflict with the Brotherhood without deep reflection on the essence of democracy or commitment to its mechanisms.”⁵⁸ Hamzawi was shouting at a country that had been mobilized in support of a coup by elites like Naguib Sawiris, who funded *Tamarod* to the tune of \$28 million USD, Sawiris offered lots of publicity (including a music video that he commissioned) via his newspapers and TV channels.⁵⁹ His self-described “political channel,” ONTV, led the media assault on the Brotherhood. He operated ONTV at a loss, and “became bored” after the coup and sold it to pro-Sisi business tycoon Ahmed Abu Hashimi.⁶⁰ Upon announcing the purchase, Abu Hashimi praised ONTV and Sawiris for confronting Egypt’s pre-coup “dangers.”⁶¹

Even with the backing of the *Tamarod* and massive public demonstrations, in the wake of the July coup General Sisi took pains to “create the impression” that he had seized power “only very reluctantly, at the request of the Egyptian people.”⁶² His media backers persistently claimed “that Morsi’s removal constituted a revolution, *not a coup.*”⁶³ When in 2015 a series of (voice authenticated) audio tapes that revealed Sisi discussing the conspiracy were broadcast by an Islamist television station in Turkey, Mekameleen, the President’s media supporters attacked the credibility of the reports based on their origins. “They are fabricating and faking the voices,” claimed Ahmed Moussa, a Sisi mouthpiece,

“because there are big international institutions working with those people and providing them with the highest level of technology.”⁶⁴

Revolutionary discourse was spread and performed by *Tamarod* on the Egyptian street.⁶⁵ On top of the civil-military celebrations—which included colorful airshows by the Air Force and green laser shows—demonstrators were encouraged to tell the world what happened in Tahrir was, “Not a coup” (see Figure 2). Many public figures parroted the idea that this was a “people’s revolution,” such as Rev. Dr. Mouneer Hanna Anis, Bishop of the Episcopal/Anglican Diocese of Egypt. He was quoted as saying,

The Armed Forces *took the side of the millions of Egyptians who demonstrated in the streets* since the 30th of June against President Mursi and the Muslim Brotherhood.... The Armed Forces *responded to the invitation of the people* to intervene and force the President to step down *at the request of the people* of Egypt.⁶⁶

Not all prominent Egyptians endorsed the coup. Liberal politician and academic Amr Hamzawi criticized fellow liberals for their “unconditional alliance with the military establishment during moments of conflict with the Brotherhood without deep reflection about the essence of democracy.”⁶⁷ An overwhelming number of public officials, however, contributed to the takeover’s revolutionary appeal by endorsing the takeover.



Figure 2. Demonstration in Tahrir Square. Source: McDonnell, 2013.

International Response. A mixed bag of condemnation and carefully crafted statements, which attempted to abide the *coup taboo* while supporting the new regime, flowed into Cairo from the international community. Speaking for the U.K., William Hague stated,

It is the problem with a military intervention, of course, that it is a precedent for the future.... That's why it is so important to entrench democratic institutions and for political leaders...to work on this together to find the compromises they haven't been able to make in Egypt over the last year.⁶⁸

A spokesman for David Cameron also tied the coup to democratic norms, stating, "We always condemn military intervention in democratic systems. What we want and what we support is a democratic future for Egypt."⁶⁹ The German Foreign Minister, Guido Westerwelle, called the coup "a major setback for democracy in Egypt."⁷⁰ So too did Turkey's Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, who said,

Only can you be removed from duty through elections, that is, the will of the people. It is unacceptable for a government, which has come to power through democratic elections, to be toppled through illicit means *and even more, a military coup.*⁷¹

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

More neutral statements arrived from Russia and China. The Russian foreign ministry, without mentioning a coup, asked for “all political forces in Egypt to exercise restraint” and “prove that they strive to solve the brewing political and socio-economic problems in a democratic framework, without violence, and accounting for the interests of all social groups and religious confessions.”⁷² A spokeswoman for the Chinese foreign ministry noted that Beijing “respects *the choice of the Egyptian people,*” before urging Egyptians to avoid bloodshed and engage in “dialogue.”⁷³ Thus while Moscow sidestepped the categorization of events in Egypt, China certified the junta’s rhetoric in referring to the coup as a matter of popular will.

Arab leaders who had backed the Arab Thermador since 2011 either avoided the question of the coup’s status or used legitimizing discourse. Rather than certify General Sisi, the coup-maker, the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani sent congratulations to the Chief Justice of the Egyptian Supreme Constitutional Court, Adly Mansour, upon his swearing-in interim president.⁷⁴ Syria’s Bashar al-Assad took the opportunity to chastise the Brotherhood by drawing on the world’s phobia of Islamist movements, noting, “Whoever brings religion to use for political or factional interests will fall anywhere in the world.”⁷⁵ Syrian State television called the Egyptian coup movement a “national, populist movement.”⁷⁶ Leadership in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (hereafter KSA), as well as their partners in crime, the Emirates, funded the popular opposition to Morsi to assist in the legitimation of the coup. More telling, KSA officials reportedly “promised Sisi that they would replace any military or economic aid cut off by Washington

in the aftermath of the regime change,” a move which Riyadh made when Washington cut aid to Pakistan in 1998 for violating norms against nuclear tests.⁷⁷ The Saudis, in other words, recognized in advance that a violation of the coup taboo would have consequences for Cairo. Even before Qatar’s Sheikh Tamim, Saudi King Abdallah congratulated interim president Mansour, an endorsement which was followed by a public phone call to General Sisi.⁷⁸

The American response was important because of the US’s economic, military, and moral leadership in the international system, as well as its powerful position within international organizations and its ability to turn off the faucet of aid money. On July 4, 2013, the day after General Sisi’s coup d’état, officials in the Obama administration’s National Security Council met in expectation to debate the “coup law,” a “statute that requires cutting off aid to any military that topples an elected government.”⁷⁹ Instead, Obama announced to the NSC that the United States “*could not call Morsi’s ouster a coup d’état.*”⁸⁰ The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Martin Dempsey (and Ben Rhodes), asked if the administration would lose credibility “if it did not call the coup what it was?”⁸¹ Then-Secretary of State John Kerry, however, argued that “Morsi’s removal *was not, in fact, a coup.* Sisi was bowing to *the public will* and acting to save Egypt.”⁸² The administration’s to determine if Morsi’s ouster was a coup led some White House staffers to privately refer to it as a “couplike event.”⁸³

Ahead of July 3rd, Obama simply told reporters that Morsi’s opponents should abide by “legal, legitimate processes” to remove the democratically elected president.⁸⁴ After Morsi’s ouster, the administration publicly avoided “questions over the legality of military aid to Egypt,” and in one instance Obama’s press secretary Jay Carney nakedly

declared it was not in the US's "best interests" to determine if the armed intervention in Egypt was a coup.⁸⁵ The administration would not suspend aid to Egypt until it reviewed the military's behavior "during and after" the ouster, perhaps suggesting officials hoped that they would not have to certify the coup if the generals swiftly turned over authority to civilians.⁸⁶ Obama officials also evoked anti-democratic expectations of Islamists, such as in stating that democracy is more than elections and that Morsi too often disregarded the viewpoints of his opponents.⁸⁷ Jay Carney even used the junta's legitimating discourse, noting, "It is important to acknowledge that tens of millions of Egyptians have legitimate grievances with Morsi's undemocratic form of government and do not believe it is a coup."⁸⁸ The White House maintained this position even in the face of growing pressure from congress, especially the late Senator John McCain, who said,

It is difficult for me to conclude that what happened was anything other than a coup in which the military played a decisive role.... I do not want to suspend our critical assistance to Egypt but I believe *that is the right thing to do* at this time.⁸⁹

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

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

We believe that ultimately the future of Egypt *can only be determined by the Egyptian people*. Nevertheless, we are deeply concerned by *the decision of the Egyptian armed forces to remove* President Morsi and suspend the Egyptian constitution. I now call on the Egyptian military to move quickly and responsibly to return full authority back to a democratically elected civilian government as soon as possible through an inclusive and transparent process....⁹⁰

The use of "nevertheless" serves to qualify the opening line, which repeats the argument advanced by the junta, i.e., the *people decided* Egypt's fate. Yet even while avoiding the phrase "coup," the statement also says that *the armed forces decided* to remove Morsi. In

response, *Tamarod* mobilized and directed demonstrations against Obama. On July 5th, Egyptian organizers passed out signs reading, in English, “Obama administration, X [bad], U.S. people, heart [good/love]” (see Figure 3).

IOs also operated according to the framework of the taboo. For instance, the UN’s Ban Ki Moon issued a statement urging a “speedy resumption of *civilian rule*.”⁹¹ Most consequential for Egypt was the African Union’s (AU) July 5 decision to suspend Cairo’s membership, citing an unconstitutional change in government (UCG). While the AU shield away from specifying the type of UCG, likely to avoid angering the Egyptian street,⁹² it nevertheless broke ranks with the international community in taking *action* against Egypt’s post-coup government. The suspension “reflected poorly on Egypt’s diplomatic standing” in Africa and beyond, especially when the AU’s High-Level Panel on Egypt visited Cairo to document the political scene and issue a series of unflattering reports about the post-coup environment. Egypt joined a list of sanctioned AU countries that were not invited to a US-Africa summit at the White House in August 2014.⁹³

While officials in Cairo tried to “brush off the rebuke as inconsequential,” they “frantically” initiated a “diplomatic offensive—sending envoys to African capitals lobbying for the reversal of the decision.”⁹⁴ “Egypt fought tooth and nail for its reinstatement to the AU,” writes Solomon Dersso. “...Cairo insisted the AU had *failed to understand the situation* in Egypt and had taken a misguided decision.”⁹⁵ As well, the authorities persistently argued that, “events of July 3 *were the result of a popular uprising*, pure and simple, and therefore did not amount to an unconstitutional change of government.”⁹⁶ That Cairo’s coup-makers denied, justified, and legitimated their transgress-



Figure 3. Source: author, Cairo, July 2013.

-ion—while under international pressure—offers support for the existence of a *coup taboo*.⁹⁷

There are several reasons why Egyptian coup-makers' behavior is best explained by normative values rather than instrumentality. Some coup theorists argue that post-coup regimes “sell” their takeovers as non-coup-like out of fear that they will lose foreign aid and/or investment and frighten markets more generally.⁹⁸ While this line of thinking may be true, it does not challenge the *coup taboo*. First, arguments that focus on aid, in particular, are implicitly or explicitly based on the existence of an anti-coup norm. That is, the discontinuation of aid is threatened because coups transgress normative boundaries. In cases where aid is not withheld, like the United States' aid to Egypt in July 2013, there is

empirical evidence that donors and recipients make diplomatic and legal arguments in order to define the event as something other than a violation of anti-coup norms.

The AU's decision to suspend Egypt marked the first instance it had applied its anti-coup policy to one of its "big five," each of which supply 15% of the AU budget, signifying that "all member states, regardless of their importance, are subject to the same rules and regulations," even if some AU member-states were uncertain about the move.⁹⁹ Egyptian diplomats conveyed Cairo's "dismay" that AU member-states "called for suspending them," and Egypt heatedly censured those states that "treated the July 3 event as a coup."¹⁰⁰ The AU made the decision to suspend Egypt for two key normative reasons: not doing so would (1) risk its legitimacy to enforce rules and (2) send a dangerous message to African conspirators that they could "encourage large-scale demonstrations as a pretext for ousting governments."¹⁰¹ While many observers criticized the AU's decision to reinstate Egypt after General Sisi's election in 2014—citing George Orwell's *Animal Farm*: "all are equal but some are more equal than others"—it is worth noting that the AU suspended a powerful member, resisted its diplomatic efforts for a year, and then only reinstated Cairo on its own terms.

Normative Effects after a Successful Coup. The main *permissive* effect of the *coup taboo* after the July 2013 coup was that, in requiring coup-makers to sell the takeover as non-coup-like, it encouraged General Sisi and *Tamarod* to take extensive measures to create an alternative narrative around their actions. A military intervention is simply the threat of violence to weigh-in on the process of regime selection, or who gets to rule.¹⁰² These often occur amidst mass protests, where crowds cheer for the functional cessation of

democracy.¹⁰³ Yet General Sisi was able to convince multiple audiences that his actions carried out the will of the people. Many observers took the bait, confusing the issue by describing the event as a popularly-backed coup, or even the portmanteau “covevolution.”¹⁰⁴ Ironically, Egyptian coup perpetrators flipped the taboo’s association of coups with illegality and authoritarianism by self-describing their actions as legal and democratic. They executed this by using tropes about the anti-democratic nature of Islamism, thus branding the democratically elected president as an autocrat in order to establish an autocratic regime.

Despite repeated violations of anti-coup norms, Middle East conspirators have demonstrated sensitivity to allegations of flouting the taboo. Forced to publicly legitimate their transgressions, these cliques have reproduced the very normative boundary between civil and military spheres from which the taboo originates. Tension between these contradictory activities has become so routinized that one might describe it as a “culture of coups,” a dual normative framework that is specific to Middle East politics. Putschists can, in short, seize power using their own alternative linguistic code, so long as they firmly denounce military coups d’état. This is distinct from normative “contestation” because coup perpetrators are not challenging the norm itself. The Egyptian coup movement in July 2013 cannot be described as “normative antipreneurs” because it did not create an alternative foundation for others to challenge the anti-coup norm. It might instead be classified as “creative resistance.”¹⁰⁵

There are at least two perverse consequences to such behavior. First, the coup movement offered a blueprint for future coup perpetrators to redefine their normative transgressions. While this is unlikely to erode the anti-coup norm, it will nevertheless

demonstrate to would-be coup-makers that they can convince large audiences that their actions did not constitute a coup. Second and related, it makes coup-detection difficult when coup perpetrators mobilize extensive resources and public relations campaigns behind their power grabs. For example, according to one Egyptian activist, the July 2013 coup was especially dispiriting because, at the time, they did not notice that they were facilitating a coup d'état. "A lot of people woke up to the fact that they participated in the coup," lamented the activist, "but didn't understand it that way...when they were demonstrating."¹⁰⁶

The Failed Coup Attempt in Turkey, July 2016

On July 15, 2016, wayward elements of the Turkish military seized a radio station to present Turks with a *fait accompli*,¹⁰⁷ but the message fell on deaf ears. Turkish crowds withstood the coup attempt. All domestic-level political actors in Turkey then issued strong anti-coup statements, tying the idea to democratic norms but also explicitly mentioning the stigma of military interventions into politics. The international community, despite serious concerns about Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's authoritarianism and rights abuses, harshly criticized the coup perpetrators' and made additional assurances in support of the anti-coup norm. In a move that did not surprise American and European officials, Erdoğan then used the moment to weaponize the shame being directed at the coup-makers in order to issue a country-wide crackdown and tighten his grip on power.

Domestic actors were firmly united against the coup, even Erdoğan's opponents. Many observers argued the coup failed because the perpetrators lacked "political and popular support," and thus could not legitimize the coup.¹⁰⁸ Parliamentarian Sezgin

Tanrikulu (CHP) claimed the coup failed because of unity between all political parties, civil society, and the media.¹⁰⁹ Leader of *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* (MHP; Nationalist Movement Party) Devlet Bahçeli thanked every Turkish citizen for defending the country when “the national will was attacked openly.”¹¹⁰ “Civilian resistance played a large role in the defeat of the rebels,” noted Danny Orbach, “as angry crowds surrounded their tanks and all major opposition parties denounced them.”¹¹¹ The coup attempt was the flip side of Tahrir Square’s argument: the *people* decided *against* a coup. Egyptian politician Hamdeen Sabahi explicitly made this argument by noting the “irony” that the Turkish people proved July 2016 was a coup and “that what happened in Egypt on June 30 [2013] was *a popular revolution*.”¹¹²

The reaction to the attempted power seizure offered further evidence that the *coup taboo*, while related to democratic norms, occupies a distinct normative position in social space. The attempt occurred at a moment in which President Erdoğan was under international pressure “for stifling dissent at home, including by journalists, academics, opposition politicians and others.”¹¹³ Thus despite experience with and future expectations of repression at the hands of Erdoğan and his *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP; Justice and Development Party), the actions of the conspirators were not excused by either the international community or the Turkish opposition (publicly).

In the public sphere, Turkey’s party elites from across the political spectrum spoke from within and on behalf of the normative environment of the *coup taboo*. Less than 24 hours after the failed coup, on July 16, the Grand National Assembly met in an emergency session, convened by Speaker of Parliament and İsmail Kahraman (AKP), represented by over 100 MPs represented by all four political parties (the governing AKP; CHP; MHP;

and the Kurdish *Halkların Demokratik Partisi* [HDP]) in represented in the legislature condemned the abortive coup in a joint declaration.¹¹⁴ The statement read, “We, the groups of four parties, strongly condemn the coup attempt against our mighty nation, the national will, the state, lawmakers, and parliament.”¹¹⁵

MPs spoke individually before the declaration was issued. AKP’s Bekir Bozdag pledged to hold the coup plotters accountable and “bring them to trial.”¹¹⁶ Özgür Özel, the leader of the parliamentary bloc of the main opposition party, the CHP, noted that his party has competed in Turkish elections over 90 years. “We may win at times and lose at other times,” Özel said, “but we have never capitulated to military takeovers,” a claim which, as mentioned above, is inaccurate.¹¹⁷ The CHP President, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, who reportedly has connections in the military, strongly denounced the attempted coup d’état.¹¹⁸ Sezgin Tanrikulu (CHP) stated, “Now the priority for our country should be to eliminate this mentality of coup that still exists in the minds of some people in military and civilian institutions.”¹¹⁹ Senior official with MHP, Oktay Vural, “Coups or terrorist organisations or any other attempt to bring violence into the political arena is fundamentally rejected by our party.”¹²⁰ Erkan Akçay (MHP) exclaimed that July 15 would “go down as a day of disgrace in the democratic history of Turkey.”¹²¹ Non-MP Chairman of the MHP, Devlet Bahçeli, tied the coup to anti-terror norms, claiming, “What happened last night was actually a terrorist attack.”¹²² This discourse quickly reached the masses, as group of Turks during the anti-coup demonstrations waved signs reading, “Hands off Turkey” and “We will *not bow down to terrorists*.”¹²³ “No coup, either military or political, can have a legal ground,” said the leader of the Kurdish HDP, Selahattin Demirtas.¹²⁴ His fellow HDP member İdris Baluken denounced the “coup mentality,” and explicitly rejected the

legitimacy of coups, stating, “military, bureaucratic and civil coup attempts cannot have a single legitimate reason.”¹²⁵

Even though some members of the opposition would have preferred the coup to bring down President Erdoğan, these parties publicly demonstrated their “unity,” which is a “rarity in a country famous for its tense political scene, and highly polarised cultural and ideological lines.”¹²⁶ Without the taboo, there would be no incentive structure exacting condemnation of the coup attempt. The opposition did, however, use the opportunity to subtly voice their opposition to Erdoğan, tying the timing of the coup to the latter’s repression, mixing their support for “civilian government and democracy” with pressure on “the government and Erdogan to enhance Turkey’s democratic standards.”¹²⁷

As we saw in Egypt, coup perpetrators have an incentive to refer to *successful* coups as revolutions. Where coups fail, even those who sympathize with or who actively supported the takeover (if they are not caught) will condemn coups. There is one prominent within-case temporal comparison from Turkey that supports this contention: the comparative reaction of Fethullah Gülen to the coup events in September 1980 and July 2016. Gülen did not merely deny involvement in the affair,¹²⁸ but condemned coups d’état as a practice, claiming he has “suffered under multiple military coups.”¹²⁹ His *denial of involvement* can easily be explained from a legal standpoint (avoiding extradition), but only the *coup taboo* can explain his harsh and general condemnation of coups.

There are two reasons why the taboo best explains Gülen’s utterances after the July coup. First, while carefully avoiding an explicit endorsement of “coups,” Gülen has in his past supported military interventions. After Chief of the General Staff Kenan Evren’s September 12, 1980 coup, however, Gülen expressed approval that the army had saved the

nation. When a reporter with *BBC News* in 2016 asked about his support for the 1980 coup, Gülen deflected, choosing instead to differentiate *support for the army* and *support for coups*.¹³⁰ Second, Gülen has publicly expressed extremist opinions on Erdoğan and the AKP since their falling out in 2011.¹³¹ If publicly expressing support for coups was not especially shameful, then it would be reasonable to expect Gülen to deny his own involvement in the coup while expressing approval for the actions of the conspirators. Third, Gülen also tried to shift blame to others, by pointing to others “inside” the operation, particularly Kemalists and nationalists.¹³² This is a subtle attempt to legitimize the coup attempt by pointing to broader support for the coup than only among Gülenists.

International Responses. The international community’s condemnation of the July 2016 coup was swift and unequivocal, as in Egypt, and usually tied anti-coup messages to democratic norms. This would be surprising if not for the presence of a *coup taboo*. As Betsy Jose has convincingly demonstrated in an essay about normative change around targeted killings, the global community routinely and harshly condemned such assassinations prior to Osama bin Laden’s death, but “bin Laden’s targeted killing and the many that have followed it have faced less opposition.”¹³³ Despite widespread acknowledgement of Erdoğan’s authoritarianism and rights abuses, EU officials denounced the coup “and backed the country’s democratic institutions and the rule of law.”¹³⁴ The Italian Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni issued a statement of relief that this “military adventure that would have brought the country into chaos with the return of ghosts of the past.”¹³⁵ In her condemnation, German Chancellor Angela Merkel made statements in support of democratic institutions, and added that, “Tanks on the streets and

air strikes against their own people are injustice.”¹³⁶ In a stark contrast to his statement on Morsi’s ouster, US Secretary of State John Kerry said the US opposed any attempt to overthrow a democratically elected leader and change must come through a constitutional process.”¹³⁷ The Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs lauded Turks “for defending their democracy *and civilian rule*.”¹³⁸

Statespersons in the Middle East also condemned the coup. In a rare moment of agreement, both Israeli officials and Hamas expressed support for the Turkish government against the coup plotters.¹³⁹ The Syrian opposition-in-exile sent a congratulatory note to the Turkish public for thwarting the coup, noting that they had saved their democracy rather than “let a group of putschists take it away in a desperate attempt to restore military rule.”¹⁴⁰ One Middle Eastern state, however, objected to this sweep of anti-coup norm inculcation: Egypt. When the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) attempted to denounce the coup, Cairo balked at the proposed declaration, which would have called on all sides in Turkey to “respect the democratically elected government of Turkey.”¹⁴¹ Clearly sensitive to questions of the legality of Gen. Sisi’s actions in July 2013, Egyptian diplomats argued that the UNSC is “in no position to qualify, or label that government—or *any other government* for that matter—as democratically elected or not.”¹⁴² Referring back to the popular basis of *Tamarod*, they urged the Council to instead use “democratic and constitutional *principles* and the rule of law” in its statement.”¹⁴³

There are several examples that challenge the idea that international actors issued anti-coup statements for reasons of instrumentality rather than normative values. On the one hand, Russia’s Foreign Ministry expressed concern about “the terrorist threats existing in the country and armed conflict in the region” that would pose a “risk to international and

regional stability,” so long as the situation in Turkey did not settle down.¹⁴⁴ On the other hand, that did not require the ministry to request that all sides in Turkey “respect the *constitutional order*.”¹⁴⁵ Moreover, Russia had an interest in Erdoğan’s ouster, even despite a thaw in relations between Ankara and Moscow since a Turkish fighter jet downed a Russian warplane at the Turkish-Syrian border in November 2015.¹⁴⁶ The AKP leader’s ambitious foreign policy pitted Turkey against Russian ally Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, there were widespread fears among Syrian refugee communities that if the AKP were ousted the new regime would normalize relations with Damascus and they would become victims of a crackdown as they had been after Morsi’s ouster in Egypt.¹⁴⁸

Relations between Ankara and Tehran had improved in April 2016,¹⁴⁹ so this rapprochement (in the area of trade) could explain Iran’s anti-coup sentiment. However, like Russia, Iran would have benefitted from a new leadership in Turkey that might have removed troops from its Syrian ally’s northern territory and withdrawn support for Syrian rebels.¹⁵⁰ Irrespective of all this, the content of Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif’s anti-coup statement was not about regional affairs, but instead about the *coup taboo* and its association with democratic norms. Zarif praised the “brave defence by the people of Turkey of *their democracy and elected government*,” and added that the failed takeover demonstrates that the “*coup d’état has no place and is doomed to fail in our region.*”¹⁵¹

Normative Effects after a Failed Coup. The main *permissive* effect of the *coup taboo* was immediately on display after the coup attempt. A harsh crackdown and abuse of the opposition was what German Chancellor Merkel had in mind when she urged President Erdoğan “to treat the arrested supporters of the attempted coup in line with the fundamental

principles of the rule of law.”¹⁵² The leader of the European Parliament’s Socialist bloc, Gianni Pitella, denounced the coup, but did not mince words in noting the bloc’s “severe judgment of President Erdogan, who is responsible for anti-democratic tendencies in Turkey against political opponents, freedom of the media and human rights.”¹⁵³ Erdoğan unsurprisingly met these concerns by swiftly blaming his chief political opponent, Gülen. The AKP leader claimed followers of Gülen were operating a “parallel state” that—drawing on the *constitutive* normative association of anti-coup and democratic norms—was trying to undermine a democratically elected government. The AKP-led government then began a widespread crack down, arresting 6,000 people in two days for “alleged” involvement in the coup.¹⁵⁴ Reports of coerced confessions, torture, beatings, and rape soon followed.¹⁵⁵

Conclusions & Implications

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

can convince large segments of their publics and the international community that their power seizure does not constitute a coup and is therefore legitimate.

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

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

Civil-military relations research generally recognizes the power of norms and legitimacy, but also tends to privilege material power in studies of coups and military extrication. This essay has shown that focusing on the possession of weapons and the ability to employ violence obscures the fact that even successful coup conspirators make

an effort to legitimate their behavior to domestic and international audiences. While this confirms existing research on norms and legitimacy in the study of CMR, it dives deeper than existing scholarship and as a result clarifies and strengthens the theoretical mechanisms that undergird those research agendas. Moreover, the analysis presented in this essay demonstrates patterns that can be used to develop expectations about social behavior in response to particular coup environments (e.g., successful/unsuccessful).

Notes

¹ E.g., Drew H. Kinney, “Politicians at Arms: Civilian Recruitment of Soldiers for Middle East Coups,” *Armed Forces & Society*, 45 (2019): 681-701; Drew H. Kinney, “Sharing Saddles: Oligarchs and Officers on Horseback in Egypt and Tunisia,” *International Studies Quarterly*, 65 (2021), 512-527.

² My emphasis, Editorial, “Lessons of Baghdad Upheaval,” *London Times*, 21 February 1963.

³ Michal Ben-Josef Hirsch and Jennifer M. Dixon, “Conceptualizing and Assessing Norm Strength in International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations*, 27 (2021), 524-529.

⁴ Hirsch and Dixon, 2021, 524.

⁵ Interview with anonymous activist, September 10, 2020.

⁶ Kinney, 2019; 2021.

⁷ Jonathan Powell, Trace Lasley, and Rebecca Schiel, “Combating Coups d’état in Africa, 1950-2014,” *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 51 (2016), 482-502; Chuka Onwumechili, *African Democratization and Military Coups* (Westport: Praeger, 1998); Francis Nguendi Ikome, “Good Coups and Bad Coups: The Limits of the African Union’s Injunction on Unconstitutional Changes of Power in Africa,” *Institute for Global Dialogue* (2007); P. D. Williams, “From Non-Intervention to Non-Indifference: The Origins and Development of the African Union’s Security Culture,” *African Affairs*, 106 (2007), 253-279; Issaka K. Souaré, “The African Union as a Norm Entrepreneur on Military Coups d’état in Africa (1952–2012): An Empirical Assessment,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 52 (2014), 69-94.

⁸ See, e.g., Wayne Sandholtz and Kendall Stiles, *International Norms and Cycles of Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Antje Wiener, *A Theory of Contestation* (Berlin: Springer, 2014).

⁹ Nina Tannenwald, “The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use,” *International Organization*, 53 (1999), 433-468; Jamal Barnes, “The ‘War on Terror’ and the Battle for the Definition of Torture,” *International Relations*, 30 (2016a), 102-124; Jamal Barnes, “Black Sites, ‘Extraordinary Renditions’ and the Legitimacy of the Torture Taboo,” *International Politics*, 53 (2016b), 198-219; William L. D’Ambruoso, “Norms, Perverse Effects, and Torture,” *International Theory*, 7 (2015), 33-60; Aisha Ahmad, “‘We Have Captured Your Women’: Explaining Jihadist Norm Change,” *International Security*, 44 (2019), 84-85; Alexander B. Downes, “Desperate Times, Desperate Measures: The Causes of Civilian Victimization in War,” *International Security*, 30 (2006), 152-195; Betsy Jose, “Bin Laden’s Targeted Killing and Emerging Norms,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 10 (2017), 44-66; Ellen Gutterman and Mathis Lohaus, “What is the ‘Anti-corruption’ Norm in Global Politics? Norm Robustness and Contestation in the Transnational Governance of Corruption,” in *Corruption and Norms: Why Informal Rules Matter*, eds. Ina Kubbe and Annika Engelbert (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 241-268; Nicole Deitelhoff and Lisbeth Zimmermann, “Things We Lost in

the Fire: How Different Types of Contestation Affect the Validity of International Norms,” *PRIF Working Papers* (2013), 18.

¹⁰ Alfred Stepan, *Rethinking Military Politics: Brazil and the Southern Cone* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

¹¹ Powell, Lasley, and Schiel, 2016; Onwumechili, 1998; Ikome, 2007; Williams, 2007; Souaré, 2009.

¹² See Souaré 2014, 79; Powell, Lasley, and Schiel 2016, 483.

¹³ Tannenwald, 1999.

¹⁴ Tannenwald, 1999; Barnes, 2016a; 2016b; D’Ambruoso, 2015; Ahmad, 2019; Downes, 2006; Jose, 2017; Gutterman and Lohaus, 2018; Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, 2013.

¹⁵ Barnes 2016b, 102-103.

¹⁶ Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 77-83; Jeffrey A. Winters, *Oligarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁷ E.g., Samuel E. Finer, *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics* (London: Penguin, 1962); Adam Roberts, “Civil Resistance to Military Coups,” *Journal of Peace Research*, 12 (1975), 19-36; Edward N. Luttwak, *Coup d’état: A Practical Handbook* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979); Staffan Wiking, *Military Coups in Sub-Saharan Africa: How to Justify Illegal Assumptions of Power* (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1983); John B. Londregan and Keith T. Poole, “Poverty, the Coup Trap, and the Seizure of Executive Power,” *World Politics*, 42 (1990): 151-183; Mitchell A. Seligson and Julio F. Carrión, “Political Support, Political Skepticism, and Political Stability in New Democracies: An Empirical Examination of Mass Support for Coups d’état in Peru,” *Comparative Political Studies* 35, no. 1 (2002): 59-60; Aaron Belkin and Evan Schofer, “Toward a Structural Understanding of Coup Risk,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 47 (2003): 594-620; Jonathan M. Powell, “Determinants of the Attempting and Outcome of Coups d’état,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 6 (2012): 1021; Milan W. Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 766; Naunihal Singh, *Seizing Power: The Strategic Logic of Military Coups* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 45; Sharan Grewal and Yasser Kureshi, “How to Sell a Coup: Elections as Coup Legitimation,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 63 (2019): 1001-1031; Kinney, 2019.

¹⁸ Finer, 1962, 20.

¹⁹ Finer, 1962, 18; and see Belkin and Schofer, 2003 for a discussion of this exact point.

²⁰ Eleizer Be’eri, “The Waning of the Military Coup in Arab Politics,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 18 (1982), 75.

²¹ Eric Nordlinger, *Soldiers and Politics: Military Coups and Governments* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1976), 92-93.

²² Wiking, 1983, 32.

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- ²³ Wiking, 1983, 10.
- ²⁴ Finer, 1962.
- ²⁵ Svolik, 2012, 766.
- ²⁶ See, e.g., Kinney, 2019.
- ²⁷ Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu, “Turkey: How the Coup Failed,” *Journal of Democracy*, 28 (2017), 60.
- ²⁸ Finer, 1962; Brian D. Taylor, *Politics and the Russian Army: Civil-Military Relations, 1689-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Powell, 2012.
- ²⁹ See, e.g., Finer, 1962, 20; Roberts, 1975; Luttwak, 1979, 57; Seligson and Carrión, 2002, 59-60; Powell, 2012, 1021; Kinney, 2019; 2021.
- ³⁰ Finer, 1962, 21; Nina Tannenwald, “Ideas and Explanation: Advancing the Theoretical Agenda,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 7 (2005), 31.
- ³¹ Roberts, 1975.
- ³² Singh, 2014.
- ³³ Luttwak, 1979, 57. Moreover, political opponents are only in rare circumstances (e.g., railway workers in early Russia, situations in which there are strong trade unions) in a strong enough position that they must be dealt with before the execution of the coup.
- ³⁴ Powell, 2012, 1021.
- ³⁵ Seligson and Carrión, 2002, 59-60.
- ³⁶ My emphasis, Archibald Clark Kerr to Anthony Eden, 4 November 1936, telegram no. 548, Foreign Office (FO) 406/74, The National Archives (TNA) of the United Kingdom, 202.
- ³⁷ Hirsch and Dixon, 2021, 525. I use concordance, not “institutionalization,” because the essay aims to demonstrate the existence of an informal taboo. The study may nevertheless inform research on coups and normative entrepreneurship. See, e.g., Onwumechili, 1998; Ikome, 2007; Williams, 2007; Souaré, 2009.
- ³⁸ Williams, 2007, 258; and see Martha Finnemore and Katherine Sikkink, “International Norm Dynamics and Political Change,” *International Organization*, 52 (1998), 891; Jeffrey T. Checkel, “Norm Entrepreneurship: Theoretical and Methodological Challenges,” in “The Evolution of International Norms and ‘Norm Entrepreneurship’: The Council of Europe in Comparative Perspective” (Oxford: Wolfson College, 2012), 1.
- ³⁹ Tannenwald, 2005, 18.
- ⁴⁰ Hirsch and Dixon, 2021, 525.
- ⁴¹ Tannenwald, 2005, 33, 37.
- ⁴² Carsten Anckar, “On the Applicability of the Most Similar Systems Design and the Most Different Systems Design in Comparative Research,” *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 11 (2008), 390.

⁴³ For a discussion of “normative effects,” see Tannenwald, 1999, 437.

⁴⁴ Hirsch and Dixon, 2021, 523.

⁴⁵ Tannenwald, 1999, 437.

⁴⁶ Jane C. Timm, “Trump endorses claim that McCabe was part of ‘coup attempt.’” *NBC News*, 18 February 2019. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-decries-coup-attempt-against-him-n972791, 2>.

⁴⁷ Tannenwald, 1999, 437.

⁴⁸ Isaac Stanley-Becker, “‘Attempted coup d’état’: Trump cites Alan Dershowitz in effort to discredit McCabe,” *Washington Post*, 15 February 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/02/15/attempted-coup-detat-trump-cites-alan-dershowitz-attempt-discredit-mccabe/?utm_term=.4996bb18fa9c, 14.

⁴⁹ Interview with businessperson who wished to remain anonymous, June 30, 2020.

⁵⁰ Taylor, 2003, 7.

⁵¹ Stephan Roll, “Managing Change: How Egypt’s Military Leadership Shaped the Transformation,” *Mediterranean Politics*, 21 (2015), 23–43., 31; Sharif A. Kouddous and Nicole Salazar, “Egyptians Fill Tahrir Square for a ‘Second Day of Rage’: ‘We have demands that haven’t been met yet,’” *Democracy Now*, 1 June 2011. https://www.democracynow.org/2011/6/1/egyptians_fill_tahrir_square_for_a_second_day_of_rage_we_have_demands_that_havent_been_met_yet, 11; Ben Hubbard and David D. Kirkpatrick, “Sudden Improvements in Egypt Suggest a Campaign to Undermine Morsi,” *New York Times*, 10 July 2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/11/world/middleeast/improvements-in-egypt-suggest-a-campaign-that-undermined-morsi.html, 2, 6; Kinney, 2021>.

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