

Colonial Legacies and U.S. Military Intervention in Oil-Producing States

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Major oil producing states have pursued two remarkably divergent paths in foreign policy at least since the 1973 OPEC oil crisis. Several states – notably Iran, Iraq, and Libya – have used the fiscal windfall from major oil production to pursue revisionist foreign policies. They have built impressive militaries, started wars with their neighbors, and sponsored radical groups across the globe. Novel data also shows that these three states rank among the most frequent targets of U.S. military interventions over the past half-century. Yet other major oil producers – think of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates – have followed the opposite path. While deeply autocratic, these monarchies are widely considered conservative regimes that act as status quo powers in the international sphere. They have maintained more limited military capabilities, initiated few militarized interstate disputes, and been staunch U.S. allies.

Why would oil-producing states pursue such radically different foreign policies?¹ Most existing work blames domestic regime-level factors. Jeff Colgan (2010, 2013b) has coined the term *petro-aggression* to describe the international behavior of regimes that combine revolutionary ideology with the military capabilities that major oil production can afford. These states exhibit all the pathologies associated with factors such as revisionist objectives, weak institutional constraints on the executive, and the role of individual leaders prone to aggression or risk-taking (Weeks 2014; Horowitz, Stam and Ellis 2015).

Yet this focus on domestic regime type begs the obvious question: why do some oil-producing states adopt and maintain revolutionary regimes, while others do not? What deeper

¹ The voluminous literature on oil and international security contains relatively few studies of foreign policy in oil states. Homer-Dixon (1994) and Klare (2002) argue that the possession of oil sparks “resource wars”, but Colgan (2013a) and Meierding (2016) give us reason to be skeptical of such assertions. Hughes and Long (2014) and Kelanic (2016) show that the threat of oil coercion influences Great Power strategy, while Gholz and Press (2010) and Glaser and Kelanic (2016) critically assess U.S. policy in the region, but neither offers theoretical arguments over the causes of revisionist objectives or military conflict. Talmadge (2008) and Itzkowitz Shiffrinson and Priebe (2011) study the potential Iranian strategy of blockading the Strait of Hormuz without generalizing beyond the specific case.

social, political and historic forces have divided this set of states into revisionist and status quo powers?

My argument is that those states most severely affected by foreign domination have proved the most likely to develop revolutionary regimes in response. In particular, those states that have had regimes imposed on them by foreign powers – whether as a remnant of colonial rule or through foreign-imposed regime change operations in independent states – will be more likely to subsequently witness the rise of revolutionary regimes.² Foreign-imposed regimes increase the appeal of revolutionary ideology, by subjecting citizens to feelings of subjugation and exploitation, and generally have weaker coalitions of support within the countries that they rule, which produces the structural opportunities for revolutionary challengers seize power. These effects are likely to hold somewhat across most states, but the frequency and intensity should be higher in oil-producing states for several reasons. The presence of oil attracts more attention from Great Powers, and has often been the chief motivation for foreign-imposed regime change in those countries, while oil production also increases the ability of the state to adopt and pursue a revisionist orientation in international politics. In sum, foreign-imposed regimes increase the appeal of, opportunities for, and durability of revolutionary regimes with revisionist objectives, in particular in oil-producing states.

The empirical parts of the paper capture the varied incidence of foreign-imposed regimes among oil-producing states, a plurality of which are located in the MENA region. Countries like Egypt and Iraq gained formal independence under monarchies installed by British colonial authorities and with formal treaties placing significant control over foreign and security policy in

² For extensive work on foreign-imposed regime change see Downes and Montén, 2013; Downes and O'Rourke, 2016; O'Rourke, 2018; Willard-Foster 2019; and Denison, 2020.

foreign hands, along with enormous permanent military bases on the ground. British and Italian military forces used nationalist resistance in Iraq and Libya during the 1920s as an opportunity to experiment with new weapons systems acquired during World War I, causing quasi-genocidal levels of violence. The efforts of Iranian Prime Minister Mossadegh to assert national control over oil production sparked a 1953 coup engineered by U.S. and British intelligence services. Conversely, the monarchies in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates have deep roots in societies they ruled before colonial administrators arrived, and govern within borders they themselves helped negotiate. All three countries were British protectorates – and later subject to U.S. security guarantees – without hosting meaningful numbers of foreign ground forces on their soil until the 1991 Gulf War. One cannot understand the divergent foreign policy orientation of these major oil-producing states without some reference to the varied history of their domestic political regimes (Yom 2015; Waldner and Smith 2020).

This article thereby demonstrates how varying legacies of colonialism have impacted international security through the foreign policy choices of individual states. Social scientists have long studied how colonial legacies impact key quantities and outcomes of political and economic governance (Easterly and Levine, 1997; Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson, 2001; Alesina, Easterly and Matuszeski, 2011). Political scientists interested in conflict have also shown that colonial legacies have frequently precipitated ethnic conflict and civil wars (Michalopoulos and Papaioannou 2016; Wucherpfennig, Hunziker and Cederman, 2016; Vogt, 2018; McAlexander, 2020). Empirical research confirms that shared colonial history have increased the propensity of Great Powers to intervene in specific civil wars (Kathman, 2010). Earlier generations of social scientists, associated for instance with dependency theory and world-systems theory, attached great weight to imperial and center-periphery dynamics in

explaining international relations (Wallerstein 1979). However, these latter traditions have largely fallen out of favor; there is less contemporary work on how colonial legacies affect interstate conflict, although it is widely understood that decolonization helped create many conflicts over territory perceived as indivisible (Toft 2003; Goddard 2010). In this paper I show that the effect of the astronomical increase in oil revenue after 1973 on international security was heavily influenced by earlier patterns of colonial governance in the affected areas.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section lays out the puzzle that motivates this project using novel data on U.S. military interventions since 1973. The second section contains my theoretical argument about the role of foreign-imposed regimes in explaining divergent regime type and foreign policy orientation in subsequent time periods. The third section describes how I gather and develop measures of the dependent, independent, and control variables, and presents descriptive statistics. The fourth section contains empirical results and robustness checks. The fifth section concludes.

OIL, CONFLICT, AND U.S. MILITARY INTERVENTION

One of the most important findings in the literature on oil and international security is that how states with major oil resources behave in the international sphere depends heavily on their domestic regime type. Colgan (2010; 2013b) shows how states that combine significant oil production with revolutionary governments tend to be more aggressive in the international sphere than other states.³ Oil resources not only enable the state to spend more resources on

³ States with *both* major oil production *and* revolutionary governments are more than three times as likely to initiate aggressive militarized interstate disputes compared to non-revolutionary petro-states (Colgan 2013b pp. 70-76). See also Hendrix 2015 on the impact of global oil prices on conflict.

acquiring military capabilities, but also reduce domestic political accountability as leaders of “rentier states” can rely on public spending and patronage politics to stay in power without taxing or consulting their constituents.⁴ In revolutionary regimes, oil resources enable leaders to pursue their revisionist goals in more aggressive fashion than they otherwise would since oil insulates them from public opinion, political opposition, and the demands of other sectors of the economy.

It is unclear whether these empirical results support a general theory or merely generalize from a small number of specific cases, as the data on both regime type (independent variable) and militarized interstate disputes (dependent variable) is heavily concentrated in just a handful of countries. First, 113 out of 129 revolutionary regime country-years (87.6%) occur in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.⁵ Iran, Iraq, and Libya constitute 73.6% of all revolutionary-regime country-years worldwide. Second, Jang and Smith (2021) show that the empirical relationship between oil, revisionist regime type, and militarized interstate disputes is not robust to excluding the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88. The reason appears to be that this war, especially the “Tanker War” where combatants attacked mercantile shipping, is recorded by conventional datasets as a particularly large number of individual militarized interstate disputes and thus has an outsized effect on regression results.

On the other hand, novel data on U.S. foreign military interventions reveal that these specific cases have been among the most important U.S. adversaries ever since the oil price rose in association with the “OPEC oil crisis” of 1973.⁶ Table 1 shows the number of years of U.S. military intervention in different countries ranked by frequency of target. Note that the three

⁴ Beblawi and Luciani 1987; Ross 2001

⁵ Colgan 2013b p. 67. The remainder divide among Russia, Venezuela, and Congo.

⁶ See Yergin 1991 and Vitalis 2020 on the history of global oil markets.

aforementioned major oil-producing states in the Middle East – Iran, Iraq, and Libya – rank among the countries that the U.S. has most frequently used military force against over the past half-century.⁷ Iraq and Iran rank as the first and third most frequent targets, with Libya at number eight. In sum, this small subset of Middle Eastern oil producers have played a role in U.S. foreign policy in the post-Vietnam era that is second only to the Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union.

Table 1: Number of Years of Ongoing U.S. Military Intervention, 1973-2019

State	Intervention- Years
<i>IRAQ</i>	22
Afghanistan	20
<i>IRAN</i>	18
North Korea	15
Syria	10
Eritrea	9
Russia/Soviet Union	9
<i>LIBYA</i>	8
Nicaragua	7
Yugoslavia/Serbia	7
China	6
Cuba	5
Panama	4
Somalia	4

Source: Kushi and Toft (2022)

Why has the U.S. clashed so frequently with these three oil producers, but not others? The answer lies in regional politics. U.S. concern for the MENA region began in the earliest days of

⁷ In this table I include only interventions where State B was the primary target of intervention. I thus exclude interventions where the U.S. intervened in a country in support of its government. Most oil producers, including Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, saw zero hostile U.S. uses of force in this time period.

the Cold War as policymakers defined the three strategic goals of maintaining the flow of oil to Western markets, keeping the Soviet Union out, and guaranteeing the security of Israel.⁸ In the immediate post-1945 period U.S. policymakers largely outsourced the task of maintaining regional order to Great Britain, which still maintained an extensive regional presence.⁹ However, the U.S. position in the Middle East completely transformed over the course of the 1970s. In 1971 Britain withdrew all of its forces “East of Suez,” abandoning its defense commitments in the Persian Gulf.¹⁰ In response, the U.S. implemented the “Twin Pillars” strategy of selling copious amounts of arms to two friendly, conservative regimes – the Shah of Iran and the King of Saudi Arabia – to act as regional policemen.¹¹ This regional architecture collapsed along with the Pahlavi regime in the Iranian revolution of 1979. In response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, theoretically threatening to bring its forces to the shores of the Persian Gulf, President Carter formulated the Carter Doctrine stating that the United States would use military force to protect its security interests in this region.

Consequently, divergent relations between the U.S. and major Middle East oil producers stem from whether the latter has acquiesced in the established, post-colonial, U.S.-dominated regional state system or whether they have attempted to fundamentally alter the regional order. Iran, Iraq, and Libya have for extended periods of time pursued revisionist foreign policies, creating a natural rivalry with the United States based on inherently opposite interests.¹² In contrast, the quest for order and stability caused the U.S. to form deep alliances with several

⁸ See Kupchan 1987; Gause 2010; Macris 2010.

⁹ Kupchan, 1987; Macris, 2010

¹⁰ With this move the UK granted independence to its last remaining Arab colonies in Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (Heard-Bey 1982)

¹¹ Weighed down by the commitments in Vietnam, U.S. President Nixon had formulated the Nixon doctrine in 1969 intended to shift responsibility for regional security in Asia to local allies; the “Twin Pillars” strategy was seen as a regional application of this doctrine. It was considered successful in its early days, in particular with the Iranian effort to quash the Dhofar insurgency in Oman.

¹² Gause 2010; Macris 2010

states that also have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. No country has better exemplified this tendency than Saudi Arabia: the mutual interest in regional stability and maintaining the status quo, rather than some mythical deal about “oil for security”, explains the powerful relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, but also pertains to U.S. relations with other states such as Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.¹³

Yet this explanation presents a new puzzle: why have some oil-producing states witnessed the rise of regimes with revisionist goals, while others have not? What deeper social, political and historic forces have divided this set of states into revisionist and status quo powers? Existing work on petro-revolutionary states treats revolutionary regimes as an exogenous shock.¹⁴ In contrast, the rest of this paper seeks to explain this precise outcome.

FROM FOREIGN DOMINATION TO REVISIONIST REGIMES

A revolutionary government is defined as one that seeks radical change not only in the formal political leadership within a country but also in the basic social, political, and economic relationships that define its existing social order.¹⁵ By definition, revolutionary governments are dissatisfied with some fundamental aspect of the existing domestic or international status quo and have powerful ideological compulsions to enact major change therein. Revolutionary governments could come to power in many different ways, including by winning democratic elections: one example would be the 1999 election of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, where he had previously been imprisoned for staging an unsuccessful coup d'état. Yet given the nature of their

¹³ Safran 1988; Bronson 2006; Vitalis 2020

¹⁴ Colgan 2010; 2013b

¹⁵ See Skocpol, 1979; Walt, 1996; Goldstone, 2001; and Colgan, 2013b pp. 20-21 for discussions of different definitions.

political ambitions, most scholars have focused on how revolutionary governments come to power by non-democratic means such as through mass uprisings, coups, or civil wars.¹⁶

Revolutions are themselves associated with a heightened risk of war in international politics, for instance because they exacerbate the uncertainty that produces international security dilemmas.¹⁷

What matters most about revolutionary regimes in explaining the divergent foreign policies of major oil producers is that revolutionary regimes are more likely to develop revisionist aims in international relations.¹⁸ Of course, some revolutionary regimes will limit their revolutionary behavior to the domestic sphere, while some revisionist states are motivated by other ideologies not necessarily considered revolutionary in nature such as nationalism. Furthermore, defining and measuring revolutionary government is a somewhat subjective task where scholars can disagree on how to classify individual cases. Yet empirical research shows that regimes that meet certain criteria deemed to make them revolutionary in nature are more prone to revisionist behavior and to initiate militarized interstate disputes, and provides a theoretical justification for why we should expect to see this pattern.¹⁹ For these reasons, and to keep with conventions in extant work, I focus my argument on revolutionary regimes but acknowledge the caveat that it is primarily revisionist intentions rather than other points of ideology that have caused conflict between certain oil producers and the United States after 1973.

My argument is that states have been more likely to experience the rise of revolutionary regimes with revisionist aims the more they have been subject to political domination by foreign

¹⁶ Skocpol, 1979; Quinlivan, 1999; Goldstone, 2001; Greitens, 2016; Stewart, 2020

¹⁷ Maoz, 1996; Walt, 1996

¹⁸ Colgan, 2013c. For a recent treatment and review of revisionist and status quo powers in international relations see Glaser, 2010.

¹⁹ Colgan, 2013b pp. 16-24, 61-76; Colgan, 2013c

powers. Foreign domination could take many shapes, such as economic dependencies created by subjugated positions in the world market for important commodities. I focus on one of the most intense forms of foreign domination: when one state has a national executive domestic regime that was imposed by a foreign power for the purpose of serving that power's interests.²⁰ In particular, I focus on how regimes imposed either as remnants of colonial rule or through foreign-imposed regime change operations create the conditions for subsequent revolutionary change. This argument is not unique to oil producers, and we should expect these dynamics to pertain among countries more widely to some extent; however, as I explain below, oil-producing states have several characteristics that make them particularly prone to these processes. For instance, the presence of oil reserves have placed these states squarely in the crosshairs of Great Powers since World War I and made them more frequent targets of foreign interference.²¹ Furthermore, the remarkable fiscal windfall that oil production produced during the 1970s placed enormous resources in the hands of select revolutionary leaders determined to turn their ideological visions into reality.

The Origins of Foreign-Imposed Regimes

The independent variable of my argument is whether a country, at any point after formally receiving independence, had a national domestic political regime that was installed by a foreign power specifically for the purpose of pursuing policies more in line with the interests of that power than the interests of the domestic population. Such regimes could be either a legacy of

²⁰ Lake (2009) shows that many states consent to hierarchical arrangements in international relations that produce mutual benefits, but my argument concerns those states that experience foreign domination by the imposition of regimes that most segments of the affected society do not desire or consent to.

²¹ Kelanic, 2016

colonial rule or the result of foreign-imposed regime change operations in independent and sovereign countries. Let us consider each possibility in turn.

As for the first type of foreign-imposed regimes, my argument hinges on how some colonies achieved formal independence without full sovereignty. Countries like Egypt (1922), Iraq (1932), and Libya (1951) gained independence under monarchies installed by colonial powers – or, as in the case of Libya, by the victorious Allied powers that occupied this former Italian colony by the end of World War II. These monarchs were bound by treaties that placed significant power over foreign and security policy in foreign hands and did not exercise full sovereignty. Furthermore, in some former colonies – including those three just mentioned – former colonial powers maintained permanent military installations and significant forces, amounting to a de facto military occupation and a perpetuation of imperial arrangements. These colonial-era executives, imposed by foreign powers to serve the interests of those powers rather than of indigenous domestic constituencies, did not exercise full sovereignty over their domains despite having been granted formal independence. During the Cold War the United States sometimes formed alliances with such regimes, thereby inadvertently perpetuating arrangements that many locals perceived as a continuation of colonial rule by other means.²²

One major debate on the long-term effects of colonialism concerns whether countries have fared differently depending on whether they experienced direct or indirect rule, where a reliance on decentralized arrangements administered by local indigenous elites characterize the latter.²³ Some scholars argue that countries with a legacy of governance according to British principles of indirect rule and common law jurisprudence – as opposed to the French model of

²² Westad, 2005

²³ Lange, 2004; Gerring, Ziblatt, van Gorp and Arevalo, 2011; Hechter, 2013; MacDonald, 2014; Muller-Crepon 2020.

direct rule and civil law – may have experienced more harmonious ethnic relations, less corruption, and more success with democratic governance after independence.²⁴ However, others point out that each empire had so much internal variation and experimentation with both forms of rule depending on local circumstances that we cannot speak of distinct and coherent national models for imperial rule; local arrangements were even sometimes so complex that different administrators could not agree on how to classify their own mode of governance.²⁵ Furthermore, the process of decolonization was often sufficiently varied and consequential so as to play a more important role in subsequent political development than the colonial-era arrangements or legacies thereof, as illustrated by cases such as Algeria or Vietnam.²⁶

My argument follows the line of scholars who argue that the process of decolonization and the nature of the post-colonial regime are more important for understanding certain subsequent political developments, such as the rise of revolutionary regimes, than are colonial legacies such as the severity of imperial rule and exploitation. All colonies during the period of colonial rule by definition had regimes installed by an outside power, but there is wide variation in the status of post-colonial regimes. In many countries the initial post-colonial leadership emerged through the national struggle for independence: leaders such as Sukarno in Indonesia, Habib Bourguiba in Tunisia, and Patrice Lumumba in Congo were nationalist heroes precisely because of their struggle against colonial rule. Regardless of what had transpired during the colonial era, these new rulers governed their states with full independence and sovereignty and, at least initially, with high levels of public approval.

²⁴ LaPorta, Lopez-de-Silanes, Shleifer, and Vishny, 1999; Treisman, 2000; Wucherpfennig, Hunziker and Cederman, 2016

²⁵ Herbst, 2000 pp. 81-93; Lange, 2004; McAlexander, 2020

²⁶ Smith, 1978; Cooper, 2018

As for the second mode of foreign-imposed regimes, other states have found themselves saddled with foreign client rulers through foreign-imposed regime change operations that took place after formal colonial rule had ended or in states that were never colonized.²⁷ The goal of foreign-imposed regime change operations is generally to install a new regime that aligns more closely with the interests or preferences of the intervener than the deposed regime does.²⁸ The allure of cheaply enacting significant change in foreign relations has swayed numerous states into pursuing regime change abroad: over the past two centuries more than 100 national leaders have been overthrown by foreign-imposed regime change operations undertaken not only by Great Powers like Britain, the Soviet Union, and the U.S. but also regional powers including Turkey, South Africa, Brazil, and Vietnam.²⁹ A narrow majority of foreign-imposed regime-change operations during the 20th century (53%) were carried out by democratic states.³⁰ Covert foreign-imposed regime change proved very popular during the Cold War, when the U.S. alone undertook 63 such operations (although a majority of them failed to change the targeted regime).³¹

Foreign-imposed regime change operations can take place in any type of country, not only former colonies. For example, the CIA actively planned military coups in Italy leading up to its 1948 and 1972 elections in case the Communist party would come to power.³² However, in practice a very large number of regime-change operations have occurred in former colonies. One reason is that most countries in the world today were at one point subjugated under European imperial rule and became independent and sovereign states through the process of

²⁷ As the empirical section below shows, most major oil-producing states are former colonies.

²⁸ Downes and Monten, 2013; Downes and O'Rourke, 2016; O'Rourke, 2018; Denison, 2020

²⁹ Downes and Monten, 2013; Downes and O'Rourke, 2016

³⁰ Downes and Monten, 2013 pp. 111-12

³¹ O'Rourke, 2018 chapter 5

³² O'Rourke, 2018 p. 109

decolonization.³³ A second reason is that departing colonial powers frequently retained political, military, and economic interests in their former colonies such as access to natural resources, raw materials, and transportation routes. Third, as part of enforcing the Monroe Doctrine the U.S. engineered 18 separate attempts at regime change in Latin America during the Cold War alone.³⁴ While technically occurring in independent and sovereign countries, many regime-change operations in former colonies concern a refusal by Great Powers to allow these countries to fully redefine and realign their internal governance and external relations. These instances of regime change – and the 1953 coup in Iran is a classic example – are best understood as a direct continuation of struggles against colonial domination, and are heavily shaped and influenced by the legacy of colonial rule.

The Brittleness of Foreign-Imposed Regimes

While a large number of statesmen have imposed new political regimes in foreign countries, the outcomes have typically been disappointing if not counterproductive. Architects behind foreign-imposed regimes have generally found themselves bound by the “statebuilder’s dilemma”: the more an external power designs a local regime to further the interests of said external regime, the more it inevitably reduces the legitimacy of the local regime in the eyes of its subjects.³⁵ As a result, the intervener rarely succeeds in their stated objectives. Empirical research shows that regime change operations typically fail to either improve long-term relations between the intervener and the imposed regime, or to create stable liberal democratic modes of governance.³⁶

³³ Wesseling, 2004; Coggins, 2014 pp. 5-7

³⁴ O’Rourke, 2018 p. 117

³⁵ Lake, 2016

³⁶ Downes and Montan, 2013; Downes and O’Rourke, 2016; O’Rourke, 2018; Willard-Foster 2019; Denison, 2020

Potential local client rulers have every incentive to paint a rosy picture of what regime change will produce so as to induce external powers to install them in power, but the reality of rule may include any number of divergent interests or other complications in client-patron relations.

My argument is that foreign-imposed regimes are more likely than other forms of government to be replaced by a revisionist regime. One reason is that foreign domination generates anger, resentment, and nationalist backlash that foment radical forms of politics. Those whose lived experience includes feelings of subjugation and exploitation by foreign hands become more likely to sympathize with ideologies that demand a fundamental reordering of basic social, political, and economic relationships that define the existing domestic and international order. However, I argue that the single most important reason why foreign-imposed regimes prove so brittle is that they typically have weaker, shallower, and narrower coalitions of support among important groups in the country they rule than do indigenous regimes, and are therefore more likely to be replaced by a revolutionary alternative.

Foreign-imposed regimes need not lack all forms of local roots and support; in contrast, foreign powers often install local leaders they believe should command some popularity or legitimacy. For instance, the Shah of Iran rose up through the ranks of the military before staging a British-sponsored coup in 1921, and consistently framed his regime in overt symbols of Iranian nationalism.³⁷ The Sanusi family of Libya, installed as a monarchy by the U.S. and the U.K. prior to formal independence in 1951, had a history of leadership within political and Islamic institutions and had organized military resistance to the Italian colonial project.³⁸ Faisal of the Hashemite dynasty had proclaimed the Arab Kingdom of Syria after conquering Damascus in the

³⁷ Abrahamian, 2008

³⁸ St John, 2002; Vandewalle, 2012

final days of World War I, only to be quickly deposed by French forces, and arrived in Baghdad as a pan-Arab hero to many of its Sunni elites when the British made him King of Iraq.³⁹

Yet foreign-imposed regimes do tend to have weaker domestic coalitions of support and often rely on their foreign patrons to stay in power to the detriment of their own domestic political standing. Sean Yom (2015) demonstrates the point in a comparative-institutionalist account of regime durability in Jordan, Kuwait, and Iran during the post-colonial era. The ruling Sabah family in Kuwait faced significant domestic challenges to its rule before the era of the oil economy and made costly concessions to important groups including Sunni tribes, the powerful merchant class of both Sunni and Shia families, and various branches of their own sprawling dynasty. As a result of building a strong cross-cutting social coalition of support the regime subsequently weathered major challenges including oil price falls, economic downturns, and the 1991 invasion by Iraq. Similarly, the contemporary borders of Saudi Arabia stem from the military conquests of Ibn Saud in the 1920s and guaranteed by a 1927 treaty with Britain essentially upheld by the United States after 1945.⁴⁰ Ibn Saud built the foundations of his regime by a complex strategy of coopting the other important tribes within his new realm.

In contrast, the Pahlavi dynasty of Iran – returned to power by British intervention in 1941 and again by a joint MI6 and the CIA operation in 1953 – used external support to crack down on all forms of political opposition in the country, alienating almost all other sources of power and producing an enormous opposing coalition fueling a mass uprising in 1979. The Sanusi family of Libya had a history of leadership in the eastern province of Cyrenaica but were essentially foreigners in Tripolitania where Muammar Gaddafi grew up. King Faisal of Iraq

³⁹ Tripp, 2000

⁴⁰ Safran, 1988; Al-Rasheed, 2002; Bronson, 2006; Vitalis, 2006

found Shia masses much less impressed by his pan-Arab visions than Sunni elites, to say nothing of the Kurds. Arab monarchies in the post-colonial era thus differed in their origins, the extent to which they had a major domestic coalition of support, and their fate in the post-colonial period. Yom and Gause (2012) point out that while it is true that monarchies weathered the “Arab Spring” uprisings of 2011 better than republics like Egypt and Tunisia did, multiple Arab monarchies collapsed during the Cold War and monarchy therefore cannot explain stability. The authors suggest that monarchies in the Gulf Arab states survived to the present while those in Egypt (1952), Iraq (1958), and Libya (1969) did not partly because the former had larger cross-cutting domestic coalitions of support incorporating regional, religious, minority, economic, and other elites; the authors speculate that the latter monarchies might not have felt the need to develop as broad coalitions because of their external patrons.

Cases of overt military presence by foreign forces – often considered to constitute military occupations by local populations, even in cases where the occupier would argue otherwise – have been particularly prone to generate nationalist backlash among affected populations.⁴¹ The monarchies in Egypt, Iraq, and Libya were not only installed by external powers but also hosted vast numbers of foreign military forces. For instance, after 1945 British and U.S. forces wanted access to the Wheelus Air Base in Libya to project air power across the Middle East and North Africa in an era where aircraft had more limited geographic reach. In contrast, Gulf Arab ruling families predate colonial rule, and their foreign security guarantees originally involved British forces stationed in India.⁴² Foreign ground forces were never present in large numbers before the Gulf War of 1990-91.

⁴¹ Edelstein, 2008; Ferwerda and Miller, 2014

⁴² Gause, 2010; Macris, 2010

While it is inherently difficult to evaluate the non-occurrence of revolutionary change, the absence of foreign troops may have contributed to political stability in several Arab monarchies. Consider, for instance, the enormous impact the 1990 U.S. operation Desert Shield had on public opinion and political opposition in Saudi Arabia.⁴³ Even though the primary mission of this military operation was to safeguard the territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia, which the country lacked the requisite capabilities to do on its own, the insertion of non-Muslim soldiers into the land of Mecca and Medina had enormous political consequences that presented the gravest threat to the stability of the Saud dynasty since the foundation of the Kingdom. The Islamic Awakening (Sahwa) movement, with roots in regional activism by Muslim Brotherhood operatives after World War II, significantly improved popular support after prominent leaders took a firm stand against the U.S. troop presence. The indignity of the foreign troop presence also converted Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden into a sworn enemy of the United States, having previously been allies resisting the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Gradually, his extremism and their conflicting views on the United States also turned Osama bin Laden against the Saudi government and by the mid-1990s he openly called for its downfall.

Foreign-imposed regimes do not always fail. One success story is the Hashemite Monarchy of Jordan, a regime created by Britain in 1921 as a colonial possession that gained independence in 1946.⁴⁴ King Abdullah, who ascended the throne in 1921, was born in the Hijaz region of present-day Saudi Arabia as the son of the Sharif of Mecca and participated in the Great Arab Revolt during World War I. After the war ended, Abdullah and his brother Faisal had grand ambitions for a unified Arab state that were thwarted when France deposed Faisal from Damascus. Abdullah intended to restore his brother's position by force, but was persuaded by

⁴³ Coll, 2004; Wright, 2006; Hegghammer, 2010; Menoret, 2020

⁴⁴ Rogan, 2009; Barr, 2011; Yom, 2015

Winston Churchill to instead accept the throne of Transjordan. Local tribal leaders initially opposed this arrangement and Transjordan was marked by political instability in its first decade, but Abdullah brought the situation under control partly as Britain granted him considerable sums of money and permanent control of the Arab Legion military forces. Jordan has proved a staunch Western ally ever since. However, this alliance has not been cheap: the majority of Jordan's government revenue at least until the early 1960s consisted of British and American financial and military assistance, and only the deployment of several thousand British paratroopers prevented an uprising by Army officers in 1958 from abolishing the monarchy and installing a revolutionary pan-Arab government in its place.⁴⁵

The Role of Oil

The effects of foreign-imposed regimes likely increase the probability of subsequent revolutionary challengers in most states, whether or not they produce oil, but the effects should be particularly important and powerful in major oil producers for four reasons. First, the presence of oil has most likely make external powers more likely to install foreign-imposed regimes. Access to oil emerged as a critical resource for national security once modern militaries adopted it as their standard fuel, and oil producing states have inevitably found themselves attracting attention from Great Powers ever since.⁴⁶ In states where the national interests or political preferences diverged from those of Great Powers this discord should be more likely to generate international conflict if that state has significant oil reserves. This exact process describes British desires to maintain influence in Iraq after its 1932 independence as well as the Anglo-American

⁴⁵ Seale, 1965; Yom 2015

⁴⁶ Yergin, 1991; Kelanic, 2016

operation in Iran in 1953. This claim is difficult to evaluate empirically because foreign-imposed regime change takes so many different shapes (overt versus covert), entails such different goals (preventive, offensive, hegemonic, ideological, humanitarian), and have such different sponsors (Great Powers, regional powers, neighboring states, international coalitions, and arguably even private companies) that – despite excellent studies of its motivations and consequences – we still struggle to develop theoretical and empirical models of when regime change should be most likely to take place.⁴⁷ At any rate, this question is beyond the scope of the current article and a subject for future research.

Second, I argue that domestic regimes in oil-producing countries should be more likely to adopt revisionist foreign policy goals than similar regimes in countries that lack oil production. States with major oil production have significant fiscal resources that make them more powerful in the international sphere as they can afford to purchase military forces, and the ability to effect meaningful change in the international arena provides better opportunities and stronger incentives to adopt a revisionist stance.⁴⁸ After the 1973 OPEC oil crisis revolutionary regimes in countries like Libya and Iraq had enormous resources to fuel their attempts to mold the Middle East and North Africa according to their ideological desires, which is likely one major reason why they tried to do so. Conversely, countries like Nicaragua, Honduras, Costa Rica, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic suffered a shameful number of regime change operations authorized by U.S. Presidents in the earliest decades of the 20th century but have never had any realistic

⁴⁷ O'Rourke 2018 introduces this taxonomy. Willard-Foster 2019 makes the general argument that regime-change operations should be more common when the intervener perceives that elites are divided in the target country, and shows empirically that these operations are more common in states with political instability.

⁴⁸ Colgan, 2010 provides empirical support for this claim: revolutionary regimes with oil production are significantly more likely to initiate militarized interstate disputes than other revolutionary regimes.

opportunities to fundamentally reshape the Western Hemisphere.⁴⁹ While some leaders in minor powers may have tried to fuel international revolutions anyway – Fidel Castro comes to mind – others likely moderated their foreign policy objectives in light of their limited fiscal and military capabilities.

Third, oil production occurs independently from the productive efforts of the vast majority of the population and revolutionary leaders therefore face fewer constraints on their behavior.⁵⁰ As a result of growing demand for their products, major oil-producing countries witnessed a fiscal windfall over the course of the 1970s that may be without comparison in modern history. To give just one example, oil income in Saudi Arabia – constituting over 95% of its government revenue – increased by a factor of 60 during the 1970s.⁵¹ This lack of constraints creates a smaller minimum winning coalition: any elite that captures national power, no matter how small or isolated its cadres, can appropriate the fiscal capabilities from oil production to enact their agenda. Most other forms of economic production require greater concessions to major economic interests. Yet the growth of oil revenue after 1973 produced a unique opportunity for the affected governments to use their rentier income for any desired purpose.⁵²

Fourth, oil production could make a revisionist regime more durable once in place. For instance, Egypt – a major oil producer in 1945 – became a powerful revisionist force in the Middle East after the 1955 rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser. Nasser held leadership roles in the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Non-Aligned Movement, deployed troops to support the 1962 officer's coup in Yemen, and actively worked to undermine conservative regimes from Syria to Saudi

⁴⁹ Downes and Monten (2013) register nine U.S.-sponsored regime change operations in these countries between 1909 and 1926 (Appendix A, pp. 3-4).

⁵⁰ Beblawi and Luciani, 1987; Ross, 2001; Colgan, 2013b; Weeks, 2014

⁵¹ Yergin, 1991 part III; Rogan, 2009 p. 495

⁵² Dietrich, 2017

Arabia with the intent of causing regime change.⁵³ However, by the late 1970s under Anwar Sadat it moderated its international objectives, formed an alliance with the United States, and made peace with Israel.⁵⁴ One key reason for this foreign policy realignment was the limits on capabilities imposed on Egypt by its stagnant economy. Perhaps if the country had possessed major oil reserves it would have persisted with its revisionist stance for longer, in the mold of Libya under Gaddafi.

Empirical Implications

To summarize the argument, foreign-imposed regimes increase the appeal of revolutionary political alternatives by alienating citizens experiencing subjugation and exploitation. The brittle roots of foreign-imposed regimes, which typically lack a broad coalition of support in the country they rule, produce the structural opportunities for revolutionary challengers to stage a coup, enact a mass uprising, or present some other fundamental challenge to the existing order. The presence of oil reserves makes external powers more likely to install foreign-imposed regimes, and also makes a subsequent revolutionary regime more likely to adopt revisionist objectives in the international sphere. In sum, my argument is that foreign-imposed regimes make oil-producing states more likely to subsequently adopt and maintain revolutionary regimes with revisionist foreign policy objectives. We know from the literature that states that combine oil resources and revisionist objectives are significantly more likely to initiate militarized interstate disputes.

⁵³ Seale 1965; Aburish 2004

⁵⁴ Gardner 2011

DATA AND DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

To assess my argument I gather data on revisionist regimes, foreign-imposed regime change, and several geographic, economic, and political control variables. For data on revisionist regimes I use the petro-revolutionary regime metric compiled by Colgan (2010, 2013b). This country-year-level dataset includes every year that any country worldwide from 1945-2001 saw its gross revenues from net oil exports constitute at least ten percent of annual GDP, for a total of 804 observations of petro-states.⁵⁵ The dataset also includes a binary measure of whether the country had a petro-revolutionary regime in that particular year, and there are 125 country-years coded positive for this metric. The dataset contains only independent and sovereign countries and years under formal colonial rule are therefore excluded.

For the independent variable I code two binary variables to capture the extent and severity of foreign domination.⁵⁶ One captures whether the colonial power installed a loyal client regime during the colonial era that then remained in power after the country gained formal independence, while the other metric also adds instances of foreign-imposed regime change operations between the onset of the Cold War in 1945 and the OPEC oil crisis in 1973. The first measure captures regime change that occurred before countries gain independence, which is useful if we want to assess the correlates of revolutionary regimes in the full period of 1945-2001 for which we have data; furthermore, a full 24 of the 31 countries involved are former colonies. The logic of the second measure is twofold: by including foreign-imposed regime change operations in the 1945-72 period we capture the effect of (predominantly Western-engineered)

⁵⁵ Colgan (2013b) pp. 64-67

⁵⁶ Sources for this endeavor include Bethell (1984) on Latin America; Crouch (1996, 2007) on South-East Asia; Wesseling (1996), Westad (2005), Englebert (2009) and Reno (2011) on Sub-Saharan Africa; Abrahamian (2008), Rogan (2009), Gause (2010), Macris (2010), Barr (2011) and Vandewalle (2012) on the Middle East and North Africa; and Downes and Montan (2013), Downes and O'Rourke (2016) and O'Rourke (2018) on foreign-imposed regime change operations.

early Cold War operations, and by restricting data on revolutionary regimes to the 1973-2001 period we study only the period after the OPEC oil crisis. This event marks a decisive shift in market power from consumer to producer nations, and also a structurally higher price; these developments thus had significant impacts on domestic politics and foreign policy within the affected countries.⁵⁷

By the first metric there are four instances of colonial powers installing pliant regimes that subsequently became the national executive when the jurisdiction formally became an independent state: Egypt (monarchy established in 1922 with the continuous British military presence regularized in a 1936 treaty); Iraq (Britain installs King Farouk in 1921, grants independence in 1932, and then returns the King to power in 1941 following a pro-Axis coup); Libya (U.S. and U.K. forces seize control in 1943 and implement a new local administration that eventually becomes the Idris monarchy with formal independence from 1951); and Iran (while technically independent, Iran was divided into spheres of influence by Britain and Russia during the ‘Great Game’ and under military occupation during both World Wars; Britain promoted the coup of Reza Khan in 1921 and then replaced him with his son in 1941).

The second metric, aside from reflecting the 1953 coup against Prime Minister Mossadegh in Iran, also adds two additional countries: D.R. Congo (U.S.-Belgian assassination of Patrice Lumumba in 1961) and Oman (while a somewhat ambiguous case, the 1970 palace coup replacing the Sultan with his son was executed by British officers).⁵⁸ For both metrics I exclude cases of failed regime change operations, such Dutch attempts to remove Sukarno as ruler of Indonesia in 1948, as well as the 1945 Allied effort to restore the pre-war political

⁵⁷ Yergin, 1991; Rogan, 2009 chapter 12

⁵⁸ Macris, 2010 chapter 5; O’Rourke, 2018 p. 109

regime in Norway to replace German collaborators. I also exclude Syria, which witnessed numerous coups in its first few decades as an independent country; while foreign involvement by Egypt and Iraq was frequently suspected, it was never conclusively proven to serve as primary cause and I therefore follow conventional datasets on foreign-imposed regime change in excluding the case.⁵⁹

Table 2 summarizes the key dependent and independent variables for all countries included. Out of 31 countries, four gained formal independence under colonial-era regimes and three countries saw new regimes arrive through foreign-imposed regime change operations in the 1945-1972 period. Iran is the one example of both processes.

⁵⁹ Seale, 1965; Downes and Monten, 2013

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

	Years as Petro-State, 1945-2001	Petro-Revolutionary Regime-Years	Colonial-Era Executive	Foreign-Imposed Regime Change, 1945-72
Algeria	1962-2001	1966-1977		
Angola	1975-2001			
Azerbaijan	1991-2001			
Cameroon	1980-1998			
Congo (DRC)	1973-2001	1973-1976		1961
Ecuador	1973-2001			
Egypt	1977-1985	1977-1980	1922	
Equatorial Guinea	1993-2001			
Gabon	1967-2001			
Indonesia	1949-1990			
Iran	1945-2001	1979-1996	1941	1953
Iraq	1945-2001	1958-2001	1932	
Kazakhstan	1996-2001			
K. of Saudi Arabia	1945-2001			
Kuwait	1961-2001			
Libya	1961-2001	1969-2001	1951	
Malaysia	1979-1990			
Mexico	1980-1983			
Nigeria	1961-2001			
Norway	1980-2001			
Oman	1971-2001			1970
Qatar	1971-2001			
Russia	1991-2001	1991-1999		
Sudan	2000-2001	2000-2001		
Syria	1971-81, 89-2001			
Trinidad & Tobago	1962-2001			
Tunisia	1974-1985			
Turkmenistan	1991-2001			
United Arab Em.	1971-2001			
Venezuela	1945-2001	1999-2001		
Yemen	1990-2001			

Finally I add several geographic, economic, and political control variables. Geographic data on surface area comes from Alesina, Easterly and Matuszeski (2011). Data on population numbers and per-capita GDP comes from the World Development Indicators published by the World Bank. Cold War era is a dummy variable coded positive for all years prior to 1990. Per-capita GDP has several missing values, especially for Libya, but all other control variables are complete.

EMPIRICAL MODELS

To test these hypotheses I estimate two sets of linear probability models.⁶⁰ The outcome measure is a binary score of whether the country, in that particular year, had a petro-revolutionary regime. The first set of models estimates the effect of a country receiving independence under a colonial-era regime on subsequently developing a revolutionary regime, while the second set uses the other metric of foreign domination that combines countries that had colonial-era executives with those that experienced foreign-imposed regime change after independence. All models use region fixed effects.⁶¹

Table 3 shows the first set of models, estimating the correlates of a country gaining independence from colonial rule under an executive installed by the colonizer to further their interests and whether the country has subsequently adopted and maintained a revolutionary regime. The effect of colonial-era executives is statistically significant at the 1% level across all

⁶⁰ As a robustness check described below I also estimate logistic regression models. The models yield the same relationships, but linear probability models with a binary independent variable are easier to interpret in terms of substantive effects.

⁶¹ The data divides all countries into eight major regions of the world. From a theoretical perspective it would be preferable to use standard errors clustered on the country, but with only 31 countries in the dataset we have insufficient clusters according to conventional standards. As a robustness check I use block bootstrapping to circumvent this limitation in the data.

model specifications, and the effect is large: in any one year during 1945-2001, a country that had gained independence under an executive installed by colonial powers was about 47% more likely to have a revolutionary regime in power. Revolutionary regimes are also more likely in larger and wealthier states and in those with a colonial past. Note that the number of observations falls slightly when we include GDP per capita due to missing values.

Table 3: Correlates of Revolutionary Regimes, post-1945

VARIABLES	(1) Rev. Regime	(2) Rev. Regime	(3) Rev. Regime
Colonial Regime at Independence	0.522*** (0.0429)	0.463*** (0.0496)	0.466*** (0.0514)
Former colony	0.0695*** (0.0187)	0.142*** (0.0342)	0.139*** (0.0346)
Pop. (log)		-0.0103 (0.0102)	0.00657 (0.0115)
Area (km ² , log)		0.0369*** (0.01000)	0.0380*** (0.00968)
Cold War era		-0.0507** (0.0203)	-0.0370* (0.0205)
GDP/cap. (log)			0.0473*** (0.0150)
Region Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	-0.0695*** (0.0187)	-0.543*** (0.125)	-1.043*** (0.196)
Observations	804	804	793
R-squared	0.383	0.398	0.395

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 4 displays the second set of models, using an alternative metric of foreign domination that includes both states that gained independence with a colonial-era executive as well as those that witnessed foreign-imposed regime change operations during the early Cold War (1945-72). In these model specifications the range of the dependent variable is therefore constricted to the years of 1973-2001, or in other words, the period after the OPEC crisis heralded structural change in the international oil market bringing higher prices and a greater share of revenues to producer nations. Again, we can see that those states that labored under a foreign-imposed executive – whether of colonial or more recent origins – at some point during 1945-72 had about a 46% higher probability of maintaining a revolutionary regime in any one subsequent year, an effect that is statistically significant at the 1% level across specifications. Consistent with previous models, larger and wealthier oil producers and those with a colonial past are also more likely to adopt revolutionary regimes.

Table 4: Correlates of Revolutionary Regimes, post-1973

VARIABLES	(1) Rev. Regime	(2) Rev. Regime	(3) Rev. Regime
Foreign-Imposed Regime pre-1973	0.498*** (0.0402)	0.459*** (0.0362)	0.458*** (0.0372)
Former colony		0.461*** (0.0333)	0.455*** (0.0324)
Pop. (log)		-0.00578 (0.00958)	0.0165 (0.0110)
Area (km ² , log)		0.0625*** (0.00952)	0.0581*** (0.00970)
Cold War era		-0.000808 (0.0219)	0.00365 (0.0221)
GDP/cap. (log)			0.0515*** (0.0157)
Region Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	0	-1.257*** (0.111)	-1.836*** (0.228)
Observations	609	609	601
R-squared	0.391	0.543	0.530

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

These models present strong evidence concurrent with my main hypothesis: more intense modes of foreign domination have made oil-producing states more likely to subsequently adopt and sustain petro-revolutionary regimes. As for alternative explanations, note in particular that the coefficient on the Cold War dummy variable is inconsistent across specifications and rarely statistically significant at conventional levels. While oil producers in the Middle East have been

at the center of international conflicts after the end of the Cold War, these conflicts cannot be blamed primarily on the effects of unipolarity (Monteiro, 2014). Finally, while not displayed in the tables, the coefficient on the MENA region dummy variable is not consistently significant across all models. Consequently, we should refrain from ascribing the results to any Middle East exceptionalism based on culture or religion.

Robustness checks

To ensure that the results are robust to various concerns I employ alternative variables and model specifications. First, I estimate all specifications using logistic regression instead of linear probability models. Second, I estimate these two sets of models while including first quadratic and then also cubed terms of the relevant control variables (the log values of population, territory, and per-capita GDP, respectively). Across these models there are minor changes in which control variables exhibit statistical significance, but no meaningful change in the independent variables which remain significant at the 1% level throughout.

Third, I estimate the main specifications using block bootstrap standard errors clustered on the country. The reason to use clustered standard errors is that the error terms across different country-years for the same country are likely correlated. However, conventions dictate that we should use at least 42 clusters but there are only 31 countries in the dataset; the block bootstrap technique circumvents this problem by using repeated simulations.⁶² Across the resultant models, employing both region fixed effects and block bootstrap standard errors, the independent

⁶² Angrist and Pischke, 2009 pp. 308-23

variables still exhibit statistical significance at least at the 5% level in all specifications while the control variables generally slip into statistical non-significance at conventional thresholds.

CONCLUSION

A century ago, a small number of enormous empires controlled most territory on the globe and most independent states in the world today were at that point formal imperial possessions. The present-day international state system reflects many facets of the former colonial order which, in a sense, had winners and losers. In some states indigenous elites have governed societies within borders that at least partly reflect local political and geographic realities. These states have been more likely, in the post-colonial era, to adopt conservative regimes with a status quo orientation in international relations. Other states experienced the mirror opposite as their inhabitants labored under foreign-imposed regimes, military occupation, industrial levels of violence, and arbitrary international borders reproducing territorial disputes and insecurity. While many of these insights pertain across the post-colonial world, oil producing states have faced a unique situation because the singular commodity of oil gave them the power to change the international status quo. Consequently, the phenomenon of petro-aggression stems partly from deep colonial roots.

While the phenomenon of petro-revolutionary states clusters very heavily in the MENA region, the results in this study should strongly caution readers against explanations based on Middle East exceptionalism based on culture or society. What is exceptional appears rather to be its experience of colonial history and foreign domination. Most Latin American countries gained independence in the early 1800s, while many in Africa and Asia had to wait until the 1960s if not

later. In contrast, many important countries in the MENA region – including Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia – gained formal independence in the period of time enveloped by the two World Wars. Perhaps at this moment in world-historic time departing colonial masters nurtured particular confidence in their ability to install pliant regimes to do their bidding, in ways unmatched during the Cold War.

To further understand the divergent trends in foreign policy among oil producers we thus need a more refined analytical understanding of both the processes of colonial rule and U.S. foreign policy after 1945. Why did European powers choose to install certain types of colonial regimes in certain countries, and why did they exert efforts to keep colonial-era executives in power after independence in some states but not in others? How did these efforts harmonize with more general national security strategies of ascertaining access to oil reserves? As for U.S. foreign policy, why did Cold Warriors pursue foreign-imposed regime change operations in some petro-states but not in others? In a way, understanding the behavior of petro states represents only a partial equilibrium in the study of oil and international politics; to move to a general equilibrium model we need to systematically understand the behavior of all other relevant actors as well. Observers of the Global South find all too often that understanding domestic politics in far-flung corners of the world requires references to foreign policies formulated in Western capitals.

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