Explaining Middle East Participation in the Convention Against Torture

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Abstract

The study of international regimes has largely concentrated on two central questions: 1. Why do states sign and ratify international regimes?; and 2. Do states comply with international regimes? These questions are deeply intertwined, as lack of compliance signals either state helplessness or ulterior motives for ratification behavior. In this paper, I will focus on those ulterior motives, mainly aid-seeking behavior and the desire for trade benefits.

This paper seeks to demonstrate the relationship between Middle Eastern states’ participation in the Convention Against Torture (CAT) and the acquisition of economic benefits. Additionally, it examines the significance of conflict in determining ratification behavior.

About the Author

Derek Hoot is a senior studying Political Science and Arabic Studies. He is interested in international human rights law and the implications of geopolitics on human rights.
Introduction

For the purposes of examining motives for Middle Eastern CAT compliance, the “Middle East” includes Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, Iraq, Iran, Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. In order to demonstrate the changing state of human rights, specifically with regards to torture, the Cingranelli-Richards (CIRI) Human Rights Database's variable on the practice of torture was used. The CIRI Database defines torture as the “purposeful inflicting of extreme pain, whether mental or physical, by government officials or by private individuals at the instigation of government officials” (Cingranelli, 2014). The CIRI Database primarily draws from State Department data and is used by over 400 organizations worldwide. Each country-year is independently coded by at least two coders to ensure reliability. Data on political terror, physical integrity, and armed conflict was used, which is described at length under “variable operationalization.”

Ratification Theory

In Oona A. Hathaway's 2007 paper “Why Do Countries Commit to Human Rights Treaties,” she describes what she calls the “collateral consequences” of committing to a human rights treaty. Hathaway asserts that “the decision to commit to a treaty… has collateral as well as legal consequences. These collateral consequences arise from the reactions of domestic or transnational actors to the state's decision to commit to the treaty” (Hathaway, 2007). This paper will focus on the transnational consequences, which according to Hathway, “may come about through the linking of foreign aid, trade, or other transnational relationships to the state's decision to ratify.”
Other political scientists hold that a state's decision to ratify can also be influenced by domestic factors such as conflict, political instability, and uncertainty. In his paper on the origins of human rights regimes, Andrew Moravcsik claims that “governments seek to establish reliable judicial constraints on future non-democratic governments or on democratically elected governments that may seek (as in interwar Italy and Germany) to subvert democracy from within” (Moravcsik, 2000). He goes further to say that “[a state's] willingness to tolerate sovereignty costs increases insofar as the costs are outweighed by the benefits of reducing domestic political uncertainty” (Moravcsik, 2000). This implies that states in conflict are more likely to be ratifiers because they have a greater stake in reducing political uncertainty.

However, just as political uncertainty and domestic strife can increase a state's likelihood of ratification, conflict is believed to have a negative effect on human rights realities. The United Nations states that “serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law are common in many armed conflicts. In certain circumstances, some of these violations may even constitute genocide, war crimes or crimes against humanity.” That said, it also acknowledges the complex relationship between human rights and conflict. The United Nations System Staff College in Turino, Italy, which trains United Nations personnel, cites the Cape Town Centre for Conflict Resolution, stating that “[the relationship] is two-fold: conflict can lead to human rights violations, and the sustained denial of human rights can lead to violent conflict” (Parleviet, 2002). This paper will focus on the first relationship: countries in conflict are more susceptible to human rights violations.

Beyond the tangible benefits of aid, trade, and decreased political uncertainty, ratifying states may seek to participate in the “window dressing phenomenon,” that is, they simply wish to appear “good” to the international community while continuing noncompliant behavior in private
settings. This is an international phenomenon, but it is much stronger on a regional level. Hathaway contends that “if a country lies in a region in which human rights norms are highly valued, it will seek to demonstrate its commitment to these shared norms and thereby smooth relations with other countries in the region” (Hathway, 2007).

I chose to analyze the Middle Eastern countries because of the complex nature of human rights, conflict, aid, and trade in the Middle East. Although the “Middle East” is a Eurocentric term and its boundaries are largely considered arbitrary, I chose the definition is concurrent with the State Department's definition of the “Near East” and “Middle East” in 1958 (with the exception of Yemen and the United Arab Emirates, which were established in 1971 and 1990 respectively, and Iran, which I considered because of its geographic location and its relevance to the study of the effects of conflict and exports on ratification) (The New York Times, 1958). In studying the ratification of human rights agreements, I focused my efforts on countries' ratification behavior in relation to the Convention Against Torture.

In this paper, I seek to explain why Middle Eastern countries, especially those that ultimately fail to comply with the Convention Against Torture, ratify it anyway. I hypothesize that Middle Eastern countries who ratify the CAT will experience “rewards” in the form of increased foreign aid despite stagnating or decreasing human rights conditions in their countries post-ratification. I also hypothesize that conflicts with a domestic dimension will increase the likelihood of CAT ratification.

Variable Operationalization
In explaining CAT ratification behavior, I divided my independent variables into three major categories: human rights realities, economic variables (transnational collateral consequences), and conflict variables (domestic collateral consequences).

I chose to describe human rights realities in Middle Eastern countries by using Purdue's Political Terror Scale [PTS], and Cingranelli-Richards Human Rights Data Set torture [TORT] and physical integrity [PHYSINT] variable. I chose the Purdue PTS scale in particular because it provides insight into the more visible state behaviors that do not comply with the CAT. Its coders are also specifically trained to ignore their personal biases and give states the benefit of the doubt while analyzing human rights reports. Purdue researchers’ Political Terror Scale (PTS) uses evaluations of torture, rule of law, civil and political rights, and political murder from both the State Department and Amnesty International. For my PTS variable, I averaged State and Amnesty findings, which range from zero to five. Level One implies that the state in question is “under a secure rule of law, [where] people are not imprisoned for their views, and torture is rare or exceptional.” (Gibney, 2016) In contrast, in Level Five countries, terror has expanded to the whole population – there is no limit on the means or thoroughness in which the leaders of Level Five societies pursue personal or ideological goals.

The PTS variable works in tandem with the torture and physical integrity variables to show whether human rights conditions improved in Middle Eastern societies post-ratification. However, it also shows the value the society in question places on its international image. If a state is attempting to “window dress” by signing onto human rights agreements, they may or may not continue to practice torture but will attempt to reduce overt forms of political terror.
The Cingranelli-Richards (CIRI) data set defines torture as the “purposeful inflicting of extreme pain, whether mental or physical, by government officials or by private individuals at the instigation of government officials” (Cingranelli, 2014). The torture variable ranges from zero to two, with zero meaning “torture did not occur” in that given year, one meaning “torture was practiced frequently” and two meaning that torture was widespread and/or systematic.

My last human rights-related variable, physical integrity (PHYSINT), is an additive index constructed from the torture, extrajudicial killing, disappearance, and political imprisonment. It ranges from zero to eight (no government respect for these four rights and full government respect for these four rights, respectively) (Cingranelli, 2014).

In order to determine whether countries were motivated to ratify the CAT for economic benefits, I employed two variables, representing “aid” [FAID] and “trade” [EXPO]. Both of my data sets were from the World Bank Database. In operationalizing aid, I took year-by-year data of foreign aid from 1981 to 2011. In operationalizing trade, I took year-by-year data of the percent of the state's gross domestic product that was composed by exported goods and services. FAID is in US dollars and EXPO is a percentage (World Bank, 2015).

I also wanted to capture the effect of armed conflict, specifically armed conflicts with a domestic dimension, on CAT ratification. I hypothesized that conflicts with domestic consequences would increase political uncertainty and therefore correlate with a higher likelihood of ratification. For my armed conflict variables, I used the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset (Uppsala Conflict Data Program/Centre for the Study of Civil Wars, International Peace Research Institute, Oslo). Because the nature and intensity of armed conflicts
could potentially affect state ratification behavior as well as forms of government repression, I used UCDP/PRO's disaggregated conflict variables as well as their intensity variable.

UCDP/PRIO defines an armed conflict as a “contested compatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths” (Uppsala University, 2016). Armed conflicts in the dataset are separated into four categories: extrasystemic conflicts, interstate conflicts, internal conflicts, and internationalized conflicts. Extrasystemic conflicts occur between a state and a non-state group outside of its own territory, like the American mission to destroy al Qaeda. Interstate conflicts occur between two or more states, internal conflicts occur between the government of a state and one or more internal opposition group(s) without intervention from other states, and internationalized internal armed conflicts occur between the government of a state and one or more internal opposition group(s) with intervention from other states (secondary parties) on one or both sides. I coded this “nature of conflict” variables as binary/binomial variables. For example, if a state experienced an extrasystemic conflict in 1984, it would receive a score of one for the extrasystemic [ExtraSys] variable for that year.

The conflict intensity [Intensity.Level] variable ranges between one and two, with a score of one describing a “minor” conflict in which between 25 and 999 battle-related deaths occurred in a given year, and a score of two describe a “war” in which at least 1,000 battle-related deaths occurred in a given year (Uppsala University, 2016). To account for some countries experiencing multiple conflicts during the same year, the conflict intensity variable is additive. For instance, if a state experiences two wars and a minor conflict in a single year, that year receives an intensity level score of five.
Results

First, I wanted to examine the human rights conditions in Middle Eastern societies post-ratification of the Convention Against Torture to see whether they improved. Out of the twelve ratifying countries, political terror increased in eight (two-thirds) of them. Likewise, eight countries experienced a decrease in physical integrity post-ratification. Only four countries experienced an increase in torture. “Improvement,” however, is not the international standard. Out of the twelve ratifiers, all but two (one being Iraq, which has no torture data post-ratification) experienced years where they practiced “frequent” torture. Additionally, Qatar, which signed in 2000, experienced widespread and systematic torture for the majority of its post-ratification years. The only truly CAT-compliant state from ratification in 2004 to 2011 is Syria, a state which has since descended into civil strife and resorted to bombing and deploying chemical weapons on its own citizens.

Next, I wanted to get an idea of whether CAT-ratifying countries were experiencing increased aid and trade post-ratification, to see whether they were seeking transnational collateral consequences, and being rewarded. Two-thirds of ratifying countries experienced increases in foreign aid post-ratification. Likewise, eight ratifiers, or two-thirds of ratifying countries, experienced an increase in exports as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product. Lastly, even though nearly every single ratifier was in one way or another non-compliant since ratification, every single ratifier experienced either aid or trade benefits.*

Figure 1.a. – Comparing compliance and transnational collateral consequences
In order to empirically test this phenomenon, I designed a logit model describing the effects of foreign aid, exports, and the various conflict variables (nature and intensity) on CAT ratification. Logit, or logistic regression models are used to estimate the probability of a binary response variable based on one or more predictors. In this case, state compliance with the CAT is

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Did political terror increase post-ratification?</th>
<th>Did physical integrity decrease post-ratification?</th>
<th>Did torture increase post-ratification?</th>
<th>Did foreign aid increase post-ratification?</th>
<th>Did exports increase post-ratification?</th>
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</thead>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes***</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*That is not to say that there were not countries that temporarily or completely phased out torture in the years following ratification: Syria and Turkey phased out torture completely post-ratification (until 2011) and Yemen phased out torture for the next five years. Still, in all cases, there existed post-ratification years in which torture was practiced frequently.

**Bahraini political terror decreased post-ratification but then experienced backsliding

***Israeli torture did not increase for four years post-ratification

****Saudi foreign aid increased briefly post-ratification
the binary response variable. Model code and summary of fit are included in the Appendix I, and time-series describing trade and aid variables are included in Appendix II.

Two variables demonstrated significance: internationalized conflict and foreign aid. Internationalized internal conflict had a p-value of 0.0268 and foreign aid had a p-value of 0.0714. This means that given the data, there is a 7.14% chance that the null hypothesis, that internationalized internal conflict has no effect on CAT compliance, is true. Likewise, given the data, there is a 2.68% chance that the null hypothesis, that foreign aid has no effect on CAT compliance, is true. The \([\text{Internat}]\) variable had a negative coefficient, implying that the more internationalized conflict that a society experienced, the less likely they were to ratify the CAT. In contrast, foreign aid had a positive coefficient, implying that the more foreign aid a state received, the more likely they were to ratify the CAT.

This first finding seems counterintuitive: It would seem likely that a state experiencing any kind of internal conflict, however internationalized, would be pressured into trading increased political certainty for decreased sovereignty. However, I argue that, out of all the conflict types, internationalized internal conflict is the most threatening to state sovereignty. In that case, a regime will do everything in its power to avoid taking actions that will further reduce or threaten state sovereignty. This includes the active avoidance of international human rights agreements, including the CAT.

The second finding reaffirms my hypothesis about transnational collateral consequences. Countries exhibit aid-seeking behavior when deciding whether or not to ratify the CAT. The data provides dramatic examples. Turkey, Qatar, Lebanon, and Egypt all experienced 100%+
increases in foreign aid in the first five years after ratification, with Egypt almost quadrupling its aid numbers from $1.6 billion to $6 billion from 1986 to 1990.

**Discussion**

In examining motives for ratifying the Convention Against Torture, only internationalized internal conflict and foreign aid had a significant effect on state ratification behavior. There are several potential reasons as to why other conflict variables and the trade variables did not have a significant effect.

For the three insignificant conflict variables, two possible explanations exist based on the literature. One explanation is that these conflicts affect a state's sovereignty profile and political uncertainty profile. Therefore, in some conflicts, trading sovereignty for political certainty is not feasible because both are threatened to a relatively equal extent. In other conflicts, political certainty is paramount, but there is no discernible pattern that implies that internal armed conflict, extrasystemic conflict, or interstate conflict influence state ratification behavior one way or the other.

Another explanation for the insignificance of these three conflict variables is that ratification only decreases political uncertainty for certain regimes in conflict, particularly fledgling democracies. Most Middle Eastern countries, according to the Polity Project, are autocracies and anocracies (Marshall 2013). Therefore, these are not “governments [seeking] to establish reliable judicial constraints on future nondemocratic governments or on democratically elected governments that may seek...to subvert democracy from within,” nor are they working to prevent “democratic backsliding,” as Moravcsik posits. Moravcsik’s reasoning supports the findings: conflict-involved states with lower polity scores are rarely ratifiers.
For the trade variable (exports as a percentage of gross domestic product), there are also opposing elements that may influence ratification behavior in ambiguous ways. Intuitively, countries that demonstrate rent-seeking behavior will ratify human rights treaties to maximize trade benefits. However, rentier states often experience rampant human rights violations due to lack of accountability. DeMeritt and Young argue that “repression is less costly where states do not rely on their citizenry for generating revenue, so that these states are more likely than others to use indiscriminate violations of personal integrity rights as a policy tool” (DeMeritt and Young, 2013). That is not to say that non-compliant states never ratify, but that repressive states may avoid agreeing to human rights treaties to deny dissenters any sort of legitimate legal framework. For some states, Hathaway’s “legal consequences” may outweigh any positive collateral consequences.

With the presumption that internationalized internal conflict discourages ratification, let us examine Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, all of whom experienced internationalized internalized conflicts during the 1981-2011 time period. Iraq, which experienced IIC from 2004 onwards, did not ratify the CAT until 2011, the exact year that the conflict deescalated from “war” status to “minor conflict” status on the UCDP/PRIO scale. Lebanon, which experienced IIC in 1983 and 1984, did not ratify the CAT until 2000. Yemen, which experienced IIC from 2009-2011, ratified the CAT 18 years prior, in 1991. It would be interesting to see, had Yemen not ratified the CAT yet, how long this conflict would postpone their government's ratification decision.

Lastly, what about the “window dressing” argument? Do regimes use ratifying as a tool to conform to regional or international norms? As noted in the results (Figure 1.1), the majority of ratifiers experienced increased political terror post-ratification. These are largely overt acts of violence that violate international human rights norms. Considering that PTS data comes from
the State Department and Amnesty International, these acts are largely visible to state and non-
state actors. One argument is that by ratifying the CAT, regimes temporarily distract from their
human rights malfeasance. Another factor is that countries only care about the regional norms to
which Hathaway refers, and thus may not strive to meet the international standard if it is
significantly more difficult to conform to than the regional norm.

**Limitations**

If I were to examine the role of trade, aid, and conflict in human rights agreements again,
I would operationalize my variables much differently to minimize the number of binary and low-
range, discrete variables in my regression. For example, instead of having a conflict intensity
variable that ranges from one to two, I would have a variable describing the number of battle-
related deaths in the conflict. This would better capture the wide range of conflict intensity
within and between Middle Eastern states, and perhaps provide a more detailed picture of how
conflict intensity affects compliance behavior.

To further improve upon this analysis, I would also collect country aid data to determine
the primary sources of foreign aid post-ratification. Distinguishing specific aid types, such as
military aid, would also provide useful information. It is possible that ratifiers are seeking
specific types of aid. Placing all aid types in a single variable makes it difficult to unpack what
motivates ratification behavior. Seeking out specific types of aid could skew the results because
certain states may receive significantly larger amounts of military or humanitarian aid than
others.

In addition, there are obviously other factors beyond ratification that lead to increased
exports and foreign aid. Humanitarian disasters, free trade agreements, resource discovery, and
other factors can influence these economic variables. Controlling for these events would greatly improve further studies. With these added controls, researchers could more accurately discern the “reward” effect that causes countries to exhibit aid-seeking behavior and pursue trade benefits.

Lastly, examining this phenomenon in other regions could shed some light on why Middle Eastern governments behave the way that they do. Do regions with more diverse economies exhibit the same aid and rent-seeking behavior? Do regions with more established human rights norms ratify human rights agreements at faster rates than regions without those norms? By broadening the study, researchers could glean more information about economically driven and normative behavior.

Conclusion

Across the Middle East, repressive regimes that are unable to fully comply with the Convention Against Torture ratify the CAT to obtain foreign aid benefits. When experiencing internationalized internal conflicts, however, Middle Eastern countries avoid ratification to preserve their threatened sovereignty. Other conflict types do not affect ratification behavior, perhaps because of ambiguous effects on sovereignty and uncertainty profiles, or perhaps because these regimes have no interest in bolstering the judicial means of future democracies.

Transnational collateral consequences matter. When countries see non-compliant ratifiers in their region rewarded, they pile onto human rights agreements regardless of their capacity to comply. Not only does this reward aid-seeking behavior, it undermines the legitimacy of the international human rights regime and harms the very citizens it claims to protect.

Furthermore, the sovereignty-certainty calculus matters. Countries that feel that their sovereignty is threatened are unlikely to agree to human rights treaties, and therefore are unaccountable to
human rights norms. In countries where the government feels its sovereignty is compromised, little can be done to push a human rights agenda.

Policy implications are two-fold: First, foreign aid benefits should be explicitly contingent on compliance, not ratification, especially if military aid is involved. This should not discourage ratification because it is still a prerequisite for compliance. Second, interventionist countries should reevaluate their approach to promoting human rights internationally. For example, by dismantling Iraqi sovereignty, the War in Iraq postponed the Iraqi ratification decision by a number of years. Thus, Iraq's road to human rights compliance was lengthened considerably. In the future, commitment to preserving a state's sovereignty in the long run may persuade them to concede some sovereignty to the international human rights regime in the short run. This commitment can be stated explicitly during negotiations, referred to as an upside of ratification (i.e. recognizing human rights provides an extra layer of legitimacy), and communicated through state and supra-state organization behavior. For example, states and international organizations pushing the CAT should limit intrusive military actions and be wary of statements that challenge the legitimacy of potential ratifiers. With this approach in mind, the international human rights regime can move to encourage Middle Eastern participants to act on the CAT.
References


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Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, Centre for the Study of Civil War at the International Peace Research Institute Sweden, n.d. Web. 06 May 2016.
Appendix I:

Figures explained.

Figures 2.a.-2.p. are time-series describing the human rights conditions of each Middle Eastern country from 1981-2011. They include the Political Terror Scale (PTS) variable (in gray), the physical integrity (PhysInt) variable (in black) and the torture (TORT) variable (in blue). The vertical red line represents the year that the country in question ratified the Convention Against Torture.
Figures 3.a-3.o are time-series describing the fluctuation in foreign aid in each Middle Eastern country from 1981-2011. The vertical red line represents the year that the country in question ratified the Convention Against Torture.

Figures 4.a-4.o are time-series describing the fluctuation in exports (as a percentage of gross domestic product) in each Middle Eastern country from 1981-2011. The vertical red line represents the year that the country in question ratified the Convention Against Torture.

Appendix II:
Figures: Human Rights Conditions, Foreign Aid, and Exports (As % of GDP)

Figure 2.a: Bahrain Human Rights Conditions
Figure 2.b: Egypt HR Conditions
Figure 2.c: Iran Human Rights Conditions
Figure 2.d: Iraq Human Rights Conditions
Figure 2.f: Israel Human Rights Conditions
Figure 2.g: Jordan Human Rights Conditions
Figures: Human Rights Conditions, Foreign Aid, and Exports (As % of GDP)

Figure 2.h: Kuwait Human Rights Conditions

Figure 2.i: Lebanon Human Rights Conditions

Figure 2.j: Oman Human Rights Conditions

Figure 2.k: Qatar Human Rights Conditions

Figure 3.a: Bahrain Foreign Aid

Figure 4.a: Bahrain Exports (As % of GDP)
**Figures: Human Rights Conditions, Foreign Aid, and Exports (As % of GDP)**

- **Figure 2.1:** Saudi Arabia Human Rights Conditions
- **Figure 2.2:** Syria Human Rights Conditions
- **Figure 2.3:** Turkey Human Rights Conditions
- **Figure 2.4:** UAE Human Rights Conditions
- **Figure 2.5:** Yemen Human Rights Conditions
Figures: Human Rights Conditions, Foreign Aid, and Exports (As % of GDP)

Figure 3.b: Egypt Foreign Aid

Figure 4.b: Egypt Exports

Figure 3.c: Iran Foreign Aid

Figure 4.c: Iran Exports

Figure 3.d: Iraq Foreign Aid

Figure 4.d: Iraq Exports
Figures: Human Rights Conditions, Foreign Aid, and Exports (As % of GDP)

Figure 3.e: Israel Foreign Aid

Figure 4.e: Israel Exports

Figure 3.f: Jordan Foreign Aid

Figure 4.f: Jordan Exports

Figure 3.g: Kuwait Foreign Aid

Figure 4.g: Kuwait Exports
Figures: Human Rights Conditions, Foreign Aid, and Exports (As % of GDP)

Figure 3.h: Lebanon Foreign Aid

Figure 4.h: Lebanon Exports

Figure 3.i: Oman Foreign Aid

Figure 4.i: Oman Exports

Figure 3.j: Qatar Foreign Aid

Figure 4.j: Qatar Exports
Figures: Human Rights Conditions, Foreign Aid, and Exports (As % of GDP)

Figure 3.n: UAE Foreign Aid

Figure 4.n: UAE Exports

Figure 3.o: Yemen Foreign Aid

Figure 4.o: Yemen Exports