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ANALYTICAL ESSAY

Sourcing and Bias in the Study of Coups: Lessons from the Middle East

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The last two decades have seen an increased focus on reporting bias in large-*N* datasets. Research on coups d'etat has similarly increased given the availability of coup datasets. This essay argues that while the availability of such data has pushed scholarship forward, the data collection process behind these efforts remains plagued with limitations common to event datasets. Rather than building on what previous projects have accomplished, researchers have invariably developed "new" datasets that suffer from the same problems as earlier efforts. Specifically, we point to reliance on international news sources such as *The New York Time* and *Keesing's Record of World Events* - without the adequate consultation of regional sources and expertise - as a source of concern. We explore this issue by assessing the coverage of coup events from three country cases from the post-colonial Middle East: Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. Our findings show that while existing data on successful and failed coups are largely adequate, scholars interested in coup plots and rumors will require a wider breadth of source material to identify such cases.

Durante las últimas dos décadas se ha podido observar un mayor interés en informar sobre el sesgo existente en grandes conjuntos de datos N. Al mismo tiempo, la investigación relativa a golpes de Estado ha aumentado de manera similar debido a la disponibilidad de conjuntos de datos sobre golpes de Estado. Este artículo argumenta que, si bien la disponibilidad de dichos datos ha impulsado el conocimiento académico, el proceso de recopilación de datos que está detrás de estos esfuerzos sigue plagado de limitaciones, las cuales son comunes a los conjuntos de datos de eventos. Los investigadores han seguido desarrollando de manera invariable conjuntos de datos ≪nuevos≫ en lugar de seguir desarrollando lo que habían logrado los proyectos anteriores por lo que estos ≪nuevos≫ conjuntos de datos sufren de las mismas limitaciones que los esfuerzos anteriores. En concreto, señalamos como principal fuente de preocupación la dependencia excesiva de fuentes de noticias internacionales tales como "The New York Times" y "Keesing's Record of World" Events, sin que exista el apoyo de consultas adecuadas a fuentes regionales o a expertos. Estudiamos este problema a través de la evaluación de la cobertura de eventos de golpes de Estado procedentes de 3 casos de países del Oriente Medio poscolonial: Siria, Jordania y Arabia Saudí. Concluimos que, si bien los datos existentes sobre golpes de Estado tanto exitosos como fallidos son en gran medida

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adecuados, los académicos que estén interesados en conspiraciones y rumores en materia de golpes de Estado necesitarán una mayor cantidad de material de referencia para poder identificar tales casos.

Ces deux dernières décennies, on a accordé un intérêt croissant au signalement des biais dans les ensembles de données grand N. La recherche sur les coups d'État s'est elle aussi intensifiée au vu de la disponibilité des ensembles de données sur ces événements. Cet article affirme que bien que la disponibilité de ces données ait pu faire avancer la recherche, le processus de collecte de données qui se cache derrière ces efforts n'est pas exempt des limites communes aux ensembles de données sur les événements. Au lieu de se fonder sur les avancées des projets précédents, les chercheurs ont toujours créé de ≪ nouveaux ≫ ensembles de données qui rencontrent les mêmes problèmes que les efforts antérieurs. Plus précisément, nous identifions la dépendance abusive envers les sources d'informations internationales comme *The New York Times* et *Keesing's Record of World Events*, en l'absence de vérification adéquate des sources et expertises régionales, comme un sujet de préoccupation. Nous analysons ce problème en évaluant la couverture des coups d'État dans trois pays-cas du Moyen-Orient postcolonial : la Syrie, la Jordanie et l'Arabie Saoudite. Nous observons que bien que les données existantes sur les coups d'État réussis et manqués soient dans la majorité pertinentes, les chercheurs s'intéressant aux complots et rumeurs des coups d'État auront besoin d'un plus large éventail de sources pour identifier ces cas.

Keywords: coups d'etat, political violence, Middle East, democratization, data collection, reporting bias

Introduction

Research on coups d'etat has experienced a revitalization in recent years. While the global decline of coups d'etat in the latter half of the twentieth century saw scholarly curiosity ebb, empirical efforts reemerged with the availability of global coup datasets. Widely used data from Powell & Thyne (2011) and the Center of Systemic Peace (CSP; Marshall and Marshall 2019) have been leveraged to address long-standing questions of authoritarian stability and the coup–civil war nexus (e.g., Powell 2014; Houle 2016 ; White 2020) and newer questions, such as the connection between coups and democratic transitions and stability (e.g., Marinov and Goemans 2014; Thyne and Powell 2016; Bell 2016; Schiel 2019).

Not only has coup scholarship flourished with the use of cross-national sources, but available datasets continue to grow. *International Studies Quarterly*, for example, published two new global coup data projects in 2021 alone (Albrecht, Koehler, and Schutz 2021; Chin, Carter, and Wright 2021a). Despite the promise often offered by new data collection efforts, none of these projects have attempted to describe, much less resolve, challenges brought on by reporting bias. Often relying on earlier datasets and English-language news sources to identify "candidate cases," with less attention given to regional sources and area expertise, these resources have potentially underestimated coup activity. Absent the obvious importance of the replacement of a head of state, coverage of failed coups and coup plots/rumors are especially unlikely to be prioritized by Western media and, in many cases, may not even emerge in regional news sources. By failing to address reporting bias in the data, scholars run the risk of biasing case-specific and large-*N* assessments and, in turn, can reach erroneous conclusions. The degree to which such bias might impact

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these data projects has gone unaddressed, undermining our ability to understand whether cross-country or cross-regional variation is the product of differences in politics or differences in how Western scholars study these countries and regions.

This paper investigates the presence of reporting bias through an in-depth investigation of three country cases with varying levels of coup activity in the post-independence Middle East: Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. While coups in the Middle East and North Africa notably declined by the 1970s (e.g., Be'eri 1982), contemporary datasets show that the region experienced an onslaught of coup events between 1949 and 1968, leading to the removal of monarchies and civilian governments in Egypt, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Algeria (e.g., Powell and Thyne 2011; Nardulli et al. 2013; Marshall and Marshall 2019; Chin, Carter, and Wright 2021a). Though Syria is commonly categorized as the region's most coup-prone state during this period, Jordan and Saudi Arabia are often commended for avoiding coups altogether.

Drawing on a wide array of region-specific scholarship, available media reports, archives, and memoirs, we find that the presence of reporting bias varies across different categories of coup cases. Specifically, successful coup attempts are invariably covered by Western sources and thus face the lowest risk of omission due to reporting bias. However, failed coups, plots, and rumors are at a higher risk of receiving inadequate attention in non-regionally focused sources. Plots and rumors face the highest risk of omission and are more likely—often exclusively—found in regional scholarship.

These findings provide two takeaways for the cross-national collection of coup data. First, scholars should move beyond a near-exclusive focus on Western sources when generating initial lists of "candidate cases," particularly if interested in collecting information on coup plots. Second, these efforts should also be coupled with the integration of regional and country-specific expertise more broadly, including historical assessments, declassified archives, and participant memoirs. This also allows scholars to do more than verifying events identified in pre-existing candidate lists, rather placing more of an emphasis on recognizing "new" events that were not covered in the media. Incorporating these takeaways can lead to more precise and exhaustive coup data, reduce likely reporting biases in resulting datasets, present a more accurate interpretation of the events in question, and increase the potential pool of events to investigate for case evidence.

Reporting Bias in Event-Level Datasets

Reporting bias as a challenge to event datasets has been well documented (e.g., Davenport and Ball 2002; Earl et al. 2004; Davenport 2009; Jenkins and Maher 2016; Weidmann 2016; Demarest and Langer 2018). Specifically, scholars have highlighted the reliance on media reports by datasets covering different forms of political violence, including protests, armed conflicts and civil wars, and instances of state repression. As Earl and colleagues (2004) argue, common critiques center on two issues with the reliance on such source material: description bias and selection bias. The former refers to the portrayal of events by media outlets of different stripes, presenting information of a certain event in a skewed manner. Davenport's seminal text (2009) on media coverage of the activities of the Black Panther Party shows that partisan-affiliated outlets portray the same event in dramatically different ways from non-affiliated outlets. Beyond the issue of *how* to report on an event, outlets inevitably face the challenge of both being aware of an event and deciding whether to cover it at all.

Selection bias can emerge from a host of different issues in reporting. Reports often omit coverage of events due to the organization's ideological affiliation, its audience demands, and the level of press freedom within a given country. Davenport and Ball (2002) illustrate variation in the reporting of human rights

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abuses in Guatemala based on media and non-media source material. They find that newspaper reports emphasize disappearances in urban localities, reports from human rights organizations primarily focus on large-scale instances of state repression resulting in death, and reports from on-the-ground interviews favor recent abuses that occur in rural contexts. The authors attribute this variation based on the need for media outlets and human rights organizations to compile information for specific audiences, a feature absent in information gathered from personal interviews. The above example is informative in that it demonstrates that those studying repression would be well served to go beyond a single type of source, and to broaden their coverage. While any particular source may carry inherent biases, utilizing an array of sources, even competing ones, will naturally make the researcher more aware of different perspectives on the issue.

Similar trends can be seen with the regional nature of sources. Brockett's (1992) exploration of political violence, for example, found the World Handbook of Political and Social Indicators drastically undercounted deaths and massacres in Central America, particularly Guatemala. In fact, cross-national trends seen in the Handbook's data were actually the opposite of what was described in outlets and scholarship from Central American sources. These errors, it was demonstrated, would have been avoided with the incorporation of regional and local sources. Drakos and Gofas's (2006) study on terrorism similarly finds systematic underreporting of violence in countries with low press freedoms, an issue that "has significant implications for issues such as constructing terrorism indices" (734). Baum and Zhukov (2015) report a similar pattern among media reporting on protests and state repression during the Arab Spring, with reports originating from authoritarian states underreporting instances of peaceful protests and state repression while emphasizing the violent measures taken by rebels and rioters.

Biases can also occur even within good faith efforts to be politically neutral. While prior studies of insurgent violence uncovered a relationship between cell phone accessibility and violence, Weidmann (2016) demonstrates this is partly driven by systematic reporting bias from international media outlets. Similar to Davenport and Ball, Weidmann suggests that scholars should do more to emphasize non-media sources during the data collection process. Demarest and Langer's (2018) investigation of Nigerian protests likewise finds that the Social Conflict Analysis Database (SCAD), which is exclusively reliant on online international media outlets, drastically underreports the number of events in Nigeria while favoring particularly violent events. Conversely, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED) and an author-compiled dataset, both reliant on African news sources, yield a greater number of events than SCAD, while using hard-copy local newspapers allowed them to document 686 more events than ACLED. One should not, however, conclude that local media sources alone are sufficient. In a within-case comparison of Egyptian protest datasets, Clark (2021) finds the dataset exclusively reliant on local media sources excludes several events relative to data collected by local activists, biasing in favor of events that occur near the country's capital.

Taken together, these issues demonstrate the challenges faced by data collection efforts. While it might be easy to focus on the weaknesses of any particular type of source, these studies also demonstrate the value that other types of sources have, even if limited to a particular context. The key lesson is that the more reliable data efforts are those that directly draw from a broad range of sources, whether they originate from news outlets, NGOs, governments, or other entities, and whether they are major international outlets, regional outlets, or local.

Such concerns directly apply to the study of coups. As Farcau (1994, ix) has written, "a coup is a highly nebulous thing to study" and "Only the most successful coup efforts ever reach the attention of the press." However, coup scholarship has yet to systematically engage with this issue and when it has, it has been done in a manner that is unlikely to successfully identify bias. For example, Powell and Thyne's (2011)

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effort to investigate purported coups from over a dozen earlier studies included a brief discussion of the potential for reporting bias. To their credit, the authors consider the potential for reporting bias by considering regional variation in whether their own study found evidence for previously claimed coup events. Had they been closely in line with prior efforts in finding details on coups in Latin America, but unable to verify a large number of cases coded for Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, one could conclude that regional differences in reporting could be the cause. In contrast to an expected regional imbalance in coding agreement, the authors instead find surprisingly consistent cross-regional trends in the ratio of events they could find evidence for and events they could not find evidence for. Though representing a good faith effort to address reporting bias, this approach does suffer from a major flaw. If Powell and Thyne are relying on similar sources as their predecessors, reporting bias would impact both those original efforts and the new effort in a similar manner. Rather than verifying a lack of bias, this finding could instead be a verification that their own study has similar biases as those that preceded it.

This is a crucial issue for the study of coups, as although a number of data projects have arisen, their origins are usually reliant on prior datasets. Powell and Thyne (2011) greatly advanced the coup literature by consolidating fourteen prior databases, providing consistent definitional benchmarks, and thus revitalizing empirical coup research. While the authors initially considered events identified in a large number of prior studies and then sought to identify previously undocumented cases, their efforts did not involve a systematic effort to incorporate non-Western and non-English-language sources. Thus, limiting the range of sources used. Subsequent coup datasets have similarly—even explicitly—relied on Powell and Thyne and other efforts when generating their own data (e.g. Bjørnskov and Rode 2019; Albrecht, Koehler, and Schutz 2021). This involves re-investigating known events instead of an original and detailed exploration of the phenomenon using improved methods. It should be noted that the authors of the Colpus dataset (Chin, Carter, and Wright 2021a) expanded on this previous approach by increasing transparency through online narratives and integrating alternative sources such as the *Foreign Broadcasting Information Services* (FBIS). Although Colpus is reliant on English-language sources and authors and lacks systematic consultation of regional sources, the inclusion of the FBIS provides access to media sources that may not otherwise be of interest such as speeches from foreign politicians and television and radio broadcasts, increasing to some extent the range of sources. Of course, efforts to mitigate this issue must balance the costs of "exhaustive" investigations with the benefit gained by the effort. This essay provides a first effort at an intensive investigation of a small set of countries and their coup frequencies.

Assessing the Collection of Coup Data

Prior Efforts

Attempts to gather comprehensive data on coups d'etat have existed for at least six decades (e.g. Finer 1962; Luttwak 1968; Be'eri 1970; O'Kane 1981; McGowan 2003; Powell and Thyne 2011; Chin, Carter, and Wright 2021a). Powell and colleagues (2022) note that early efforts such as Finer (1962) and Luttwak (1968) emerged to assess the wave of Cold War-era military coups while contemporary collections such as Powell and Thyne (2011) attempt to provide more precise conceptual clarity. Coup datasets often rely on a similar set of sources to compile their events, yet this has eluded any substantial critique in the literature. For instance, Powell and Thyne (2011) followed coding procedures that utilized previous sources as their starting point but expanded their searches through the usage of *The Historical New York Times*, *Keesing's*, and *LexisNexis*. More recently, the Colpus dataset has continued to push coup scholarship forward through broadened sources and trans-

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Table 1. Coup datasets and their general sources*

Dataset	Coup events covered	Consulted sources
O'Kane (1981)	Successful and failed coups	*Keesing's*, *Europa Yearbooks*, *The New York Times Encyclopedic Almanac*, *The Statesman's Year Books*, *United Nations Yearbooks of International Trade Statistics*
Lunde (1991)***	Successful and failed coups	*Keesing's*, *New York Times*, *African Research Bulletin*, Black Africa: A Comparative Handbook, Banks (1985)
McGowan (2003)***	Successful and failed coups, coup plots	McGowan (1986), Morrison et al. (1989), Lunde (1991), Wang (1996), Esterhuysen (2002), *LexisNexis*
Powell & Thyne (2011)	Successful and failed coups	*New York Times*, *Keesing's*, *LexisNexis*, Finer (1962), Luttwak (1968), etc.
Marshall & Marshall (2007, 2019)	Successful and failed coups, plots and rumors	*Keesing's*, Banks (2001), Chiozza et al. (2004), Powell & Thyne (2011)
Nardulli et al. (2013)	Successful and failed coups, coup plots	Marshall & Marshall (2007), Taylor & Jodice (1983), Luttwak (1979), the Cline Center Project (2010), Powell & Thyne (2011), *Proquest*
Singh (2014)	Successful and failed coups	*Keesing's*, *New York Times*, *Proquest*, *LexisNexis*
Bjørnskov & Rode (2019)	Successful and failed coups	Cheibub et al. (2010), *LexisNexis*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Luttwak (1968), Singh (2014)
Chin, Carter, Wright (2021a)	Successful and failed coups	Aksoy, Carter, & Wright (2015), Powell & Thyne (2011), *New York Times & Washington Post in Proquest*, the *Foreign Broadcast System*, *Keesing's*, *Regional scholarship*
Albrecht, Koehler, and Schutz (2021)	Successful and failed coups	Powell and Thyne (2011), Marshall and Marshall (2019), *ProQuest Newspaper Archive*

*Unless denoted, these datasets are global in scope.
***Africa dataset.

parency. Utilizing the *Historical New York Times*, *Keesing's*, and *LexisNexis*, as well as including the *Foreign Broadcast Information Services* increases foreign news coverage in their data. However, their approach does not include a systematic consultation of regional scholarship or expertise for the purposes of identifying new cases, running the risk of underestimating coup events. Thus, while modern coup scholars have a plethora of datasets to leverage, the range of sources is limited.

Table 1 provides an overview of ten selected datasets from the last four-plus decades. The datasets vary across event coverage, with some limited only to failed and successful coups while others integrate coup rumors and plots. We pay specific attention to the sources each dataset consults.

We take note of the steps toward data generation, particularly amongst efforts appearing in the twenty-first century. For these sources, the process sometimes begins by identifying a "candidate list of cases" generally taken from pre-existing datasets. For instance, Powell and Thyne (2011) assess fourteen different coup lists with similar conceptualizations to construct a candidate list of potential cases. Marshall and Marshall (2007, 2018) similarly identify their candidate list from the Banks (2001) Cross-National Time Series, which codes the occurrence of coups d'etat amongst other forms of political violence. The Cline Center Coup dataset (Nardulli et al. 2013; Peyton et al. 2020) relies on the efforts of Luttwak (1979), Marshall and Marshall (2007, 2019), and Powell and Thyne (2011) to construct a candidate list. Chin and colleagues (2021b) use the replication data from Aksoy and colleagues

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(2015), which are constructed from the Powell and Thyne dataset, as their starting point.

Following the identification of a candidate list from pre-existing data efforts, scholars draw on additional sources in order to consider the characteristics of the case. This is usually done to verify whether an event previously claimed to be a coup was, in fact, a coup by the authors' criteria. When details appear obvious in initial reporting, additional sources are not considered. What is rarer is for researchers to systematically search various sources for any event that should be considered for inclusion. The failed Syrian coup in 1968 included in our assessment sheds light on this issue. This event was also identified in the Colpus dataset due to its inclusion in Powell and Thyne (2011) and is corroborated with Western and English-language sources to code this event as a coup plot. However, through surveying regional newspapers, our results demonstrate that several regional news outlets explicitly mention the coup. Without the inclusion of additional sources, new data projects risk incorporating similar problems as their predecessors, though new cases are sometimes identified by accident while researching known cases.

Given our interest in the omission of coup events, we focus on the use of these sources for the latter's purposes. Table 1 shows the near-exclusive use of Western international media sources as the primary external source among contemporary datasets. For instance, Powell and Thyne (2011) rely primarily on *The Historical New York Times*, *Keesing's Record of World Events*, and sources accessed by *LexisNexis*. Similarly, Bjørnskov & Rode (2019, 540) primarily rely on the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and *LexisNexis* as their primary external source for coup events while Marshall and Marshall (2007; 2018) utilize *Keesing's* to identify new events. Below, we discuss the implications for bias based on this approach.

Theoretical Considerations

Although we avoid developing a formal theory and accompanying hypotheses, we expect to find variation in reporting across different types of coup categories. Our expectation follows the logic that bias in Western media sources likely stems from a focus on high-threshold—or high-profile—events. Specifically, successful coups should face the lowest risk of omission from Western media given the irregular—and often dramatic—nature of a state leader's removal. Coverage of failed coups is likely dependent on the severity of the attempted ouster. Discovered coup plots and rumors are the least likely categories to receive adequate coverage.

There is variation in whether failed coups reach the threshold of a high-profile event. Like successful coups, failed coups can often be accompanied with dramatic imagery and instances of violence. Coordinated attempts to capture the national broadcasting station or the presidential palace should command the attention of media reporting, even if the coupists fail to achieve their objective. In addition, failed coups can provide the pretext for widespread purges such as in the aftermath of Kenya's 1982 coup or involve serious bloodshed such as in the case of Nigeria's January 1966 coup. However, ambiguities can also plague failed coups, particularly when attempts fail relatively quickly or before reaching the capital. In these instances, targeted incumbents can quickly dispel notions that such an attempt ever occurred and suppress the flow of information.

Relative to successful and failed coups, coup conspiracies and associated rumors are the least likely category to be classified as high-threshold cases. Whereas the successful and failed coups require overt and observable actions, the latter represent conspiracies, discussions, and formulated plans for coups d'etat that never went into action.[1] It is precisely because of this distinction that we expect Western media outlets to substantially underreport the extent of coup plots and thus compromise the

[1]Though some coups have effectively occurred spontaneously, virtually all successful and failed coups were preceded by a plot, and these events are often further preceded by rumors of impending coups. Our discussion below will

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quality of existing data on such conspiracies. While the discovery of coup plots can sometimes lead to dramatic actions like publicized purges and arrests, they will most often be seen as more mundane, unverifiable events that are not of much interest to a Western outlet's consumers.

Despite our emphasis on sources of bias associated with Western media reporting, we are also cognizant of potential—and distinct—forms of bias with local media sources. As prior efforts by Davenport and Ball (2002) and Baum and Zhukov (2015) suggest, localized media reports can reflect the political and ideological preferences of local actors. Because of their proximity to the political environment, such outlets have incentives to engage in description bias when reporting on possible cases. For example, local reports could disingenuously describe the movement of troops across the country as part of a broader coup attempt or imply that recent arrests were tied to the discovery of a coup plot. Overreliance on local sources can also introduce problematic forms of bias given that coups often occur in authoritarian contexts. Aside from omitting information on coup cases because of press freedom concerns, outlets tied to the regime could circulate fabricated claims of coup plots as a pretext for purges.

Because of these various concerns over bias, we argue that scholars should move beyond a near-exclusive reliance on media sources and instead, triangulate them alongside region and country-specific scholarship. These sources can range from academic research papers to full-length book monographs across different disciplines. In-depth scholarship can provide deeper insight into ambiguous cases that are reported in local media reports but excluded in Western media. In addition, given the breadth of resources available to country specialists, including interviews and government archives, in-depth scholarship can offer information on cases unavailable in any media source. With these considerations in mind, we turn to an empirical investigation below.

Data and Methods

Case Selection

We conduct an in-depth examination of coup reporting from three different countries from the Middle East across a two-decade period (1949–1968): Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. We justify our case selection on two fronts. First, the temporal scope offers a rich opportunity to study variation in coup reporting. It is well documented that the region experienced a flurry of coup events in its post-independence period (e.g., Haddad 1971; Be'eri 1982). However, these events noticeably ebbed by the beginning of the 1970s and continued to decline over the decades. Contemporary datasets generally reflect this trend. For instance, Powell and Thyne's data (2011) reveal that 53.25% of the region's coups occurred within this 20-year span, a figure similarly represented in the Colpus data (Chin, Carter, and Wright 2021).

Second and relatedly, despite the high frequency of Middle East coups, there is variation in the level of coup propensity. The Arab monarchies of Jordan and Saudi Arabia are often lauded as success stories of the period, allegedly evading the wave of attempts seen by their neighbors in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria (e.g. Frisch 2011; Menaldo 2012; Bank, Richter, and Sunik 2015). Efforts examining realized coup attempts such as Powell and Thyne (2011), Singh (2014), and Bjørnskov & Rode (2019) generally code one to two coup attempts in Jordan during this period while CSP and the Cline Center, which include coup plots and rumors, list two and four events during this time, respectively. Across all datasets, only the Colpus project

only consider "plots" that never reached the execution stage, that is, went into motion. The existence of a plot, unlike a coup attempt, can also last for many months, often even years. Our dates emphasize the time at which the plot was "discovered."

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lists a coup event in Saudi Arabia during this period, labeling the 1964 succession crisis as a failed coup (Chin, Carter, and Wright 2021b, 248). Conversely, Syria is largely recognized as one of the most coup-prone states during this period. Among datasets coding successful and failed coup attempts, Bjørnskov and Rode (2020) offer the lowest estimate of Syria's coup events (eight events), while the Colpus project codes the highest number (eighteen events) (2021). Incorporating plots and rumors, CSP and the Cline Center code fourteen events and twenty events, respectively. To ensure variation in our set of cases, we include a high coup-activity case (Syria), a low coup-activity case (Jordan), and a case with generally no coup activity (Saudi Arabia) based on the findings of prior datasets.

Empirical Strategy

Given our expectations concerning underreported coup events, we opt to identify successful and failed attempts as well as purported plots and rumors. Rather than rely on a single coup definition from one specific dataset, we consider cases that fall within the scope of any contemporary coup dataset's definition. This strategy helps us reduce the likelihood that we are capturing cases that were omitted for conceptual reasons. While wide-reaching, this approach still provides us with a set of attributes—based on the similarities of existing definitions—to identify coups d'etat. Existing data projects are in general agreement that coups must target the state's apex authority[2] and require the *overt* participation from actors associated with the state apparatus. Coup datasets vary in the temporal threshold of a successful coup—ranging from seven days (Powell and Thyne 2011) to a month (Marshall and Marshall 2019). Thus, coup cases are considered successful once coupists or their preferred affiliates have held power for at least 7 days.

To code coup plots and rumors, we use the criteria from the Cline Center and CSP given their inclusion of such cases. The Cline Center identifies coup plots as "a plot that is discovered and disrupted in the planning stages" (Peyton et al. 2021, 3), whereas CSP considers coup plots to be allegations of a conspiracy to undertake a "forceful seizure of executive authority and office by a dissident/opposition faction within the country's ruling or political elites that results in a substantial change in the executive leadership and the policies of the prior regime" (Marshall and Marshall 2019, 1). In sum, we consider coup plots as cases in which perpetrators were planning to overthrow the incumbent but never put the plan into motion. Governments may preemptively discover these plans or in some cases, plotters simply abandon their plans but discuss them openly years later. Coup rumors refer to less specific, unverified plots to overthrow the incumbent. While many analyses of coups see the exclusion of plots and rumors given the difficulties associated with verification of the events, a growing number of relevant studies have incorporated plots and rumors in their analyses, thus meriting a consideration of the accuracy of these data (McGowan 2003; Gürsoy 2012; Bardakçi 2013; Nordvik 2019; Bell 2016).

With this strategy, we construct a candidate list of cases for a two-decade period between 1949 and 1968. We diverge from previous efforts by conducting data collection "blindly," meaning we do not consult other coup datasets when amassing our list of candidate cases. Instead, we examine a wide range of material, including Western media sources, region-specific scholarship, available regional media sources, memoirs, and available government documents. As discussed in our theoretical expectations, we justify the use of different materials as a method to address potential bias—often present in different forms—across our sources. While an exclusive use of Western media reports can result in a selection bias that favors high-threshold events, relying solely on media reports can present similar concerns over

[2]Given Colpus' focus on regime leaders—which may include individuals not in formal control of executive authority—we also consider cases in which individuals other than the formal executive are removed if they are effectively considered the regime leader.

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description bias of specific events given ideological and political incentives among local actors.

Our compilation of regional scholarship includes authoritative general histories of the country cases and the region, period-specific monographs across various academic disciplines, qualitative journal articles, and unpublished dissertations (e.g. Abidi 1965; Abu Jaber 1966; Be'eri 1970; Haddad 1971;; Olson 1982; Seale 1990; Dann 1989;Pipes 1992; Rathmell 1995; Van Dam 1996; Batatu 1999; Moubayed 2000, 2006; Tal 2002; Roberts 2013; Tell 2013; Bou Nassif 2020). We supplemented these sources with declassified intelligence and diplomatic reports from the British Foreign Office and the United States, including the Central Intelligence Agency. These reports serve as rich sources to identify secret conspiracies which were either thwarted by the government or never undertaken by the plotters. In addition, they can offer illuminating details on more ambiguous events. Finally, we use the available and relevant memoirs and written work from our time period of interest. These documents were found using the reference lists of existing scholarship as well as actively searching whether prominent actors from each period produced any written work or testimonies of relevance (e.g., Abu Nuwar 1990; al-Hawrani 2000; Jamali and King 2012). We also consult memoirs produced by relevant regional political actors outside of our country cases, such as Iraqi foreign minister and prime minister Muhammed al-Jamali, to examine any referenced cases or plots that went unreported elsewhere.

We also used available regional and international media sources. These reports come from outlets such as the *Iraq Times*, *Baghdad News*, *Mideast Mirror*, *Middle East Record*, *al-Hayat*, *The Historical New York Times*, *Le Monde*, and *Keesing's Record of World Events*. Some regional media reports, such as the Iraq Times and Baghdad News, were accessed through recently available digital archives provided by the Global Press Archive East View program. We supplemented these sources with regional media reports, primarily from *al-Hayah*, accessed from NewsBank's Middle East and North Africa database, which covers 1958–1994. International and Western media sources, such as *The Historical New York Times*, were accessed primarily through the ProQuest archives as done by other coup data efforts. Hard-copy volumes of periodicals such as *Keesing's*, *Mideast Mirror*, and *Middle East Record* were also used to identify cases and provide additional information.

We identified cases in each type of source in several ways. For electronic media databases such as ProQuest and Global Press Archive East View, we relied on specific search terms in both English and Arabic to find reports on coup cases. These terms included *coup*, *coup d'etat*, *plot*, *conspiracy*, *rebellion*, *inqilab* (coup), *al-inqilab al-askeeri* (military coup), and *muhammara* (plot/conspiracy)—paired with the specific country-name and year of interest within our parameters.[3] To ensure we are being as exhaustive as possible and not excluding cases reported under different terms, we also use terms such as *arrests* (*aietiqalat*) and *resign* (*aistaqil*) and examine the returns for reports on relevant cases. For hard-copy periodicals such as *Mideast Mirror* and *Keesing's*, we consulted every volume and issue released during our temporal span, taking note of any mention of a potential coup attempt, plot, or rumor in the countries of interest. For non-media sources such as specialized scholarship, government documents, and memoirs, we follow a similar approach by searching for keywords in both English and Arabic. For instance, when accessing declassified Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) documents from the digitized reading room, we relied on the same set of search terms used while searching through media databases. The specialized scholarship includes a vast array of historical monographs and academic papers penned by regional specialists such as Lawrence Tal (2002), Madawi al-Rasheed (2010), Sami Moubayed (2000, 2006), Hicham Bou Nassif (2020), and Hanna Batatu (1999) to list a few. As shown in Table 2 , our efforts produce sixty-two

[3]For instance, "Syria coup 1949."

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Table 2. Comparison of coup case frequency in major datasets (1949–1968)

Case	P&T			CSP			The Cline Center			Singh			B&R			Colpus			CAM			**Authors**		
	S	F	P	S	F	P	S	F	P	S	F	P	S	F	P	S	F	P	S	F	P	**S**	**F**	**P**
Syria	6	3	-	7	3	4	11	3	5	7	5	-	6	2	-	12	6	-	6	3	-	**12**	**6**	**19**
KSA	0	0	-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0	0	-	1	1	-	0	0	-	**1**	**1**	**9**
Jordan	0	2	-	0	0	2	0	3	1	0	1	-	0	1	-	0	2	-	0	2	-	**0**	**2**	**12**

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different candidate cases—thirty-seven cases from Syria, eleven from Saudi Arabia, and fourteen from Jordan.

Following the compilation of our original candidate list, we assess cases in the following datasets and their candidate lists: Powell and Thyne (P&T) (2011); CSP (Marshall and Marshall 2007, 2019); the Cline Center (Nardulli et al. 2013; Peyton et al. 2020); Singh (2014); Bjørnskov and Rode (B&R) (2019), the Colpus project (Chin, Carter, and Wright 2021a), and the Coup Agency and Mechanisms (CAM) dataset (Albrecht, Koehler, and Schutz 2021). In the following sections, we assess each country by coup event coverage in Western media, contemporary coup datasets, and specialized sources.

Analysis

Syria

Table 3 presents the coverage of coup events in Syria as identified by pre-existing datasets and our own original data collection. New events we identified in our own data collection are bolded. We specifically highlight whether a given event was reported in a Western media source most used by coup researchers (Keesing's and the New York Times) and whether more specialized scholarship, memoirs, regional news sources, or archives reported the event. Finally, we note whether the given event was included in at least one previous dataset and its candidate list.

Our findings on Syria suggest that successful coups are most likely to be captured in both Western media sources and other coup datasets relative to other types of events. All twelve successful coup events in our data were pre-identified by other datasets, though there might be occasional disagreement as to whether the event met a specific study's definition. Similarly, each case of a successful coup is corroborated by an international media source, unsurprising given the importance of change in government. Even cases of ambiguous resignations and ascensions, such as Louay al-Atassi's sudden resignation and the subsequent rise of General Amin al-Hafiz in July 1963, receive a fair amount of attention from Western sources such as *The New York Times*. At least in the context of Syria, this suggests that high-profile events such as the forced removal of a country's leader are likely to receive international attention and are less susceptible to selection bias in the sense of being completely omitted.

Similarly, Syria's failed coup attempts have almost always received attention from Western media sources. Of the seven failed attempts that we find, only one event—a failed coup in 1968—was found exclusively in specialized sources. However, though events might be often reported in Western media, these reports are often too vague to make definitive conclusions about what actually happened and who was involved. Ahmad Suwaydani's purported coup attempt in August 1968 is quite an illustrative case. Responding to Powell and Thyne's inclusion of the event, Colpus concludes "reports of a coup attempt all come over a week after the alleged coup attempt took place and come from a single Lebanese newspaper [al-Nahar] (which had a very different ideological orientation than Syria's leaders)" (Chin, Carter and Wright 2021a in the Colpus MENA codebook 2021, 229). Earlier reports of problems within the Syrian armed forces gravitated toward coverage of the rumored defection of multiple pilots. However, the August 1968 coup is specifically mentioned in various regional newspapers, including in the immediate aftermath of the purported attempt (rather than over a week later). For instance, *Hayat* described fighting between army units in Aleppo on August 14–15, whereas the Syrian government would specifically accuse Suwaydani of a coup attempt in an interview with the Egyptian press. Within that first week, the event was also reportedly covered in major Western outlets such as Le Monde and the BBC (Middle East Report 1968).

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Table 3. Reporting of coup events in Syria*

Date	Event type	Western media?	Specialized source**	Other datasets?
03/30/1949	Successful	Yes	Yes	Yes
08/14/1949	Successful	Yes	Yes	Yes
12/1949	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
12/14/1949	Successful	Yes	Yes	Yes
04/01/1950	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
05/04/1950	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
09/27/1950	**Plot**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**No**
07/1950	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
10/1/1950	Plot/Failed	Yes	Yes	Yes
11/29/1951	Successful	Yes	Yes	Yes
12/29/1952	Plot	Yes	Yes	Yes
04/10/1953	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
02/25/1954	Successful	Yes	Yes	Yes
06/19/1954	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
04/22/1955	Plot	Yes	Yes	Yes
07/15/1955	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
11/23/1956	Plot	Yes	Yes	Yes
08/12/1957	**Plot**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**No**
08/17/1960	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
09/28/1961	Successful	Yes	Yes	Yes
03/28/1962	Successful	Yes	Yes	Yes
03/31/1962	Failed	Yes	Yes	Yes
04/01/1962	Successful	Yes	Yes	Yes
04/13/1962	Successful	Yes	Yes	Yes
07/29/1962	Plot	Yes	Yes	Yes
01/13/1963	Plot/Failed	Yes	Yes	Yes
03/08/1963	Successful	Yes	Yes	Yes
03/11/1963	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
04/08/1963	Plot	Yes	Yes	Yes
07/18/1963	Failed	Yes	Yes	Yes
07/27/1963	Successful	Yes	Yes	Yes
01/25/1964	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
04/16/1964	Failed	Yes	Yes	Yes
02/23/1966	Successful	Yes	Yes	Yes
09/08/1966	Failed	Yes	Yes	Yes
08/11/1968	**Failed**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**

*Bolded entries are newly identified events.
**Specialized sources refer to regional media, regional scholarship, memoirs, and archival material from the United States and the United Kingdom.

Though overt evidence of a failed coup does exist, there is some uncertainty regarding its leadership. Various sources suggested that Suwaydani, rather than fleeing after the coup failed, had already fled due to fears of arrest and was in Lebanon at the time of the coup. Accusations subsequently made against him by Colonel Abdal Karim al-Jundi, in an interview with Egyptian media, speaks to his complicity, which could indicate prior involvement in the plot or the government's use of the attempt to justify Suwaydani's arrest. Colpus is rightfully cautious in considering the ideological leaning of the source (*al-Nahar*) they used to investigate the event, and we are intentionally cognizant of the potential description bias. There are, however, two important considerations to be made before dismissing the case as effectively a hoax.

First, if the source's ideological biases did lead to a false portrayal of the event, the portrayal actually served the purposes of the regime their coverage would be trying to undermine. Suwaydani would be arrested in July 1969 and was imprisoned for nearly a quarter-century for his alleged involvement. Second, as we note

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in our broader discussion of bias, a consideration of a broad range of sources can be useful when navigating otherwise dubious cases. Though the event has not received very detailed coverage in scholarship, it is commonly referenced by leading Middle East and Syria scholars as having been an actual attempt rather than a fabrication (e.g., Hinnebusch 2015). In fact, multiple sources Colpus specifically uses for documenting other Syrian events references the August 1968 incident as an actual coup attempt (e.g., Seale 1990; Van Dam 1996). These sources, however, are not referenced for the case's narrative. Though the details of the 1968 failed coup are less clear than other Syrian events, a more systematic review of relevant media and scholarship suggests the event cannot be attributed to slanted coverage from a single source of biased media.

Finally, we show that in the context of Syria, coup plots are—unsurprisingly—the most likely events to be excluded in both international media reports and relevant coup datasets. Although CSP and the Cline Center are the only datasets that report data on plots, we identify nearly four times as many plots as is described in these projects. Whereas every coup plot or rumor included in these datasets was reported either in the New York Times or Keesing's, any event exclusively reported in a more specialized source is omitted. This discrepancy can also not be attributed to how restrictive definitions are. CSP, e.g., utilizes a very broad definition of coups that goes well beyond the commonly invoked members of "the state apparatus" criterium. Their coup plots and rumors include many nebulous events from various actors, both unidentifiable actors and many who are far from the usual suspects for coup plots (e.g., "The Luanda Book Club"). Our identification of such a larger set of cases strongly suggests that their omission in prior data efforts is unlikely to be driven solely by coding criteria and is instead a product of the source material the authors rely upon.

The omission of certain cases can have implications for how different periods of time are represented in the data. For example, according to major coup datasets, coup events in 1950s Syria are notably scarce relative to the onslaught of events in the following decade. However, our consultation of specialized sources such as CIA documents, British Foreign Office memos, memoirs, and regional scholarship reveal at least twelve coup plots during this period, whereas CSP codes two events and the Cline Center only three. These events include at least five different plots within 1950 alone, only two of which received attention in Western media sources. For instance, the memoirs of radical populist Akram al-Hawrani and British Foreign Office documents both suggest that the 1950 assassination of Colonel Mohammed Nasir was ordered after Colonel Adib al-Shishakli discovered the former was plotting a coup against him with the aid of the Iraqi monarchy (al-Hawrani 2000, 1233; FO 501/4, EY1015/26). The event is also highlighted in scholarship, such as Bou Nassif (2020, 478), emphasizing that while researchers may lack the resources to exhaustively consult archives and memoirs, relevant events can be found in area-specific research. And far from obscure or unimportant events, these plots often involve quite overt consequences for the political environment in which they occur.

Jordan

Though Syria is well established as a coup-prone case, we also investigate the presence of reporting bias in cases with supposedly low or nonexistent coup propensity. Table 4 presents the coverage of coup events in Jordan between 1949 and 1968. Like our presentation of events in Syria, we highlight whether a case was reported in either the *New York Times* or *Keesing's*, followed by whether the case was found in a specialized source and contemporary dataset. As shown, we identify zero successful coups, two failed coups, and twelve different coup plots and rumors.

Relative to our findings in Syria, our findings for Jordan present a starker case of event omission. Between the Cline Center and CSP, which include coup plots and

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Table 4. Reporting of coup events in Jordan

Date	Event type	Western media?	Specialized source?	Other datasets?
07/01/1949	**Rumor**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
09/1951	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
09/1951	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
04/26/1956	**Plot**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**No**
04/08/1957	Failed	Yes	Yes	Yes
04/13/1957	Failed	Yes	Yes	Yes
07/1958	Plot	Yes	Yes	Yes
03/20/1959	Plot	Yes	Yes	Yes
07/24/1960	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
03/27/1961	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
01/08/1963	**Rumor**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**No**
03/22/1963	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
04/26/1963	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
07/04/1963	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**

rumors, only four of the fourteen events we uncovered are included. Any event included by the other datasets was reported in either the New York Times or Keesing's, whereas all events found exclusively in specialized sources are omitted. Just as in the case of Syria, the omission of such events can misrepresent the coup risk governments face at certain periods of time.

For instance, following King Abdullah the I's assassination in July 1951, a succession crisis emerged in the kingdom as competing factions backed different princes to take the throne. While no dataset acknowledges a coup case during this period, regional scholarship and memoirs reveal that two very significant coup plots were in motion by September 1951. The first plot was coordinated by Colonel Ali Abu Nuwar and a clique of nationalist officers in the Jordanian Armed Forces, who sought to forcibly install Prince Talal onto the throne. According to Abu Nuwar's memoirs, his clique backed Talal because of the prince's sympathies toward Arab nationalism and their fear that reactionary forces would impede his ascension to the throne (Abu Nuwar 1990, 64–5). As a result, the officers plotted a coup that involved retrieving Talal from Switzerland and ousting the government to install him as the monarch.

Likewise, this period also saw a segment of the security forces back Talal's brother, Prince Nayef, and his claim to the throne—again resulting in a coup plot. Haddad (1971) and King Hussein's biography (Snow 1972) both note that in September 1961, Prince Nayef coordinated a plot with Colonel Habis al-Majali, the commander of the Palace Guard. The coup would have seen armed units under Majali capture the palace and install Nayef in power. Once the plot was discovered, Majali was dismissed from his post and Talal eventually ascended to the throne (without the aid of Abu Nuwar's coup). Despite the high risk of a coup during this period, datasets ultimately misrepresent the succession period following Abdullah's assassination by omitting these relevant plots.

Similarly, while Jordan's treatment in coup data suggests that it evaded the region's onslaught of coup events in the mid-twentieth century, our findings show the opposite. For instance, in 1963 alone, the monarchy would uncover at least four different ongoing plots by nationalist officers with sympathies toward Gammal Abdel Nasser's Egypt (e.g., Mideast Mirror 1963; Tal 2002). Of these four events, only one was reported by the New York Times, whereas the other three are available in regional sources such as Mideast Mirror and scholarship by Lawrence Tal (2002) and Miriam Joyce (2008).

Declassified CIA documents also mention a discovered plot in March 1961, said to be spearheaded by Major General Akash Zabin, which was thwarted in its very early

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Table 5. Reporting of coup events in Saudi Arabia

Date	Event type	Western media?	Specialized source?	Other datasets?
1951	**Failed**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
1954	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
05/1955	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
04/1957	**Plot**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**No**
1959	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
07/1960	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
11/1962	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
03/26/1964	Successful	Yes	Yes	Yes
11/1964	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**
09/26/1965	**Plot**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**No**
11/1966	**Plot**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**

stages as units began to mobilize. The year before, Colonel Mohammed en-Nasser had been arrested on charges of plotting a coup against King Hussein (Mideast Mirror 1960; Tal 2002). These events' omissions may have broader implications for questions of authoritarian stability in general and coups specifically. Whereas the region's monarchies are often lauded as relatively stable compared to its other autocracies (e.g., Frisch 2011), our findings in Jordan suggest this assumption may be overstated, particularly when considering the full breadth of coup plots the monarchy faced after independence.

Saudi Arabia

Out of the three case studies, Saudi Arabia best represents the perils of source selection bias in coup data collection. Previous datasets have rarely acknowledged potential coup events in Saudi Arabia. Even datasets with an expanded scope of events such as CSP and the Cline Center code zero coup events between 1949 and 1968. However, as shown in table 5, we identify eleven different coup events in the country during this period. Of these events, we find one potential coup attempt in 1951, one potential successful coup in 1964, and nine different coup plots. Only three events—the 1964 ascension of King Faisal, a plot implicating the Egyptian government in 1957, and a coup plot resulting in the death of Prince Khalid ibn Abdul Aziz in 1965—received attention by Western media sources.

We identify the first potential coup event during the reign of King Ibn Saud in 1951, spearheaded by Captain Abdullah al-Mandili, in specialized scholarship. This event saw Mandili attempt to bomb Ibn Saud's camp but failed to successfully kill the king (Bsheer 2018, 247). To evade repercussions, the captain fled to Iraq with the aid of tribes allegedly backing his attempt. Although it is not clear whether this action wa s part of a broader attempt to seize power or simply an assassination attempt, its lack of consideration as a candidate case by existing datasets is potentially informative, especially given no coverage of the event in the *New York Times* or *Keesing's*. Similarly, subsequent coup plots targeting the monarchy are notably missing from CSP and the Cline Center's data despite the cascade of plots throughout the latter half of the 1950s and throughout the 1960s. For instance, in May 1955, Saudi authorities uncovered a serious coup plot by Egyptian-trained nationalist officers which would have seen several members of the royal family killed and the monarchy dissolved in favor of a republic (e.g. Safran 1988; Rasheed 2010; Bsheer 2018). The plotters were subsequently tried and executed—yet the event was never mentioned by relevant Western media. Scholars of Saudi politics routinely reference this event as a clear sign that civil-military relations had deteriorated amid the region's wave of revolutionary Arab nationalism. This is further emphasized in July 1960, when declassified CIA documents reveal that Saudi soldiers plotted to take

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over the government and kill several members of the royal family in the process (CIA 1960, 4). So severe were the threats of a coup against the royal family that Ibn Saud was actually forced out of power by Crown Prince Faisal in 1964, which we list as a potential coup event and is coded by Colpus.

Similar to Jordan, situating these omitted events in the broader political context in Saudi Arabia has implications beyond scholarly precision in data collection. The region's onslaught of coups in the twentieth century sought to dissolve the Western-backed monarchies and replace them with Arab nationalist republics. However, coup data projects routinely represent Saudi Arabia as virtually coup-free throughout this period. While a common assumption would be that the monarchy engaged in different types of coup-proofing to ensure its survival, our findings show that the risk of a coup attempt remained very real throughout this period.

Conclusion

The above findings highlight the promise and peril of existing coup data. Our analysis provided an encouraging insight into existing data aimed at classifying successful and failed coups. Specifically, the use of existing data sources is unlikely to lead future authors astray, as little evidence of systemic bias was found, with disagreements limited to peculiarities related to definitions and the interpretation of more ambiguous cases. However, analyses hoping to generalize from existing data on coup plots and rumors face a serious challenge. The use of existing plot data will necessarily require substantial effort to ensure the data's reliability. Our study demonstrates a large degree of omission in countries with both low and high levels of prior coup activity. Our analysis, however, is limited to a narrow range of non-democratic countries in a specific region. While the lack of access to Arabic-language sources in states with less media freedom might explain a particularly poor quality of existing plot data, it is also the case that these states in this time period were of substantial interest to Western audiences and likely received heightened attention relative to many countries in the non-Western world.

These issues are not merely hypothetical, given a long tradition in cross-national research that has utilized plot data. Many studies have utilized indices that weight the importance of successful, failed, and "plotted" coups (e.g., Jackman 1978; McGowan and Johnson 1984; Kposowa and Jenkins 1993; McGowan 2003). More recently, scholars have used unweighted variables that place plots (and rumors) alongside more observable coup acts (e.g., Collier and Hoeffler 2007; Cotet and Tsui 2013; Slater, Smith, and Nair 2014). The desire to address these events is understandable. Though plots have received scant attention relative to "attempted" coups, they—and accusations of plots more generally—have had important consequences. Coup plot allegations in 1979 Iraq, for example, allowed Saddam Hussein to purge political rivals within the ruling Ba'ath party and thus consolidate one of the twentieth century's most repressive dictatorships (e.g., Sassoon 2012). More recently, Turkey's alleged Sledgehammer Plot saw the conviction of over three hundred officers, which has since been viewed as part of the ruling AKP's efforts to marginalize the military (Bardakçi 2013). In both incidents, observers significantly questioned the validity of the allegations, framing the allegations as pretexts for incumbents to consolidate their rule. However, coup plots can also represent serious threats to the center of power, prompting important policy changes in response. For instance, after Saudi authorities uncovered a serious plot by air force officers in November 1962, King Saud "grounded the entire air force fleet, and ordered storage batteries from royal guard tanks removed" (Kechichian 2001, 103).

The more obvious cases—successful coups—have seen the rise of heralded reformers such as Egyptian President Gammal Abdel Nasser and eccentric dictators such as Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi, and have witnessed the fall of kings, presidents, and prime ministers. Unsuccessful coups have carried important conse-

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quences, such as the collapse of political coalitions, large-scale military purges, mass reprisals, and changes in foreign policy behavior. Improvements in our understanding of these events are always a welcome contribution to the study of the region's politics, and efforts to provide open cross-national data on these events have the potential to dramatically improve our ability to engage with the politics of the past.

However, the continued study of these events inevitably will require scholars to move beyond sources and data that are the most convenient. Rarely are the most convenient sources the most reliable, yet the various existing coup projects inevitably rely upon the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the reporting of high-profile Western media sources. Though this is less of a problem for successful coups that see leaders swept from power or even failed coups, existing coverage of coup plots is fraught with problems. Aside from the question of whether these sources have any need or desire to acknowledge the event actually happened, accuracy in contemporaneous reporting is notoriously difficult, even assuming an outlet's impartiality.

Our exploration of the cases of Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia illustrates the limits of Western media sources in the study of coup plots specifically while providing a glimpse into the promise of alternative data sources. Alternative sources, particularly non-Western sources and those from country experts, are an invaluable—though often unused—tool for the study of coups. This is especially true as the degree of "success" of an event decreases, as coverage of failed coups and plots will be dependent on how public and important the event is to the outlet's audience. We argue that a better approach involves prioritizing sources that value expertise on the politics and people in question.

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