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Ontological Security, Circulations of Affect, and the Arab Spring

Ontological security research in IR generally argues that agents pursue both physical security and a secure sense of self. However, insofar as this work focuses on agents' stabilizing routines, this article asks what may be gained by shifting the focus to the wider settings within which this occurs. What analytical purchase may be gained by re-focusing the study of ontological security not strictly on subjects, but on agents' broader affective environments? Drawing together insights from philosophy, cultural studies, and geography, the article contends that 'circulations of affect' can reinforce agents' sense of security within cognitively unstable environments that are typically viewed as inducing insecurity. In this sense, tracing trans-personal circulations of affect positions ontological security within the broader social processes out of which security-seeking subjects are formed. The empirical purchase of these concepts is illustrated through an analysis of articulations of security and subjectivity in the Arab Spring uprisings.

Keywords: ontological security, Arab Spring, affect, emotion, Deleuze, circulations of affect, atmospheres

One of the most common features of accounts of the Arab Spring uprisings is the use of movement metaphors to describe both the nature of the protests and how they spread across the region. Writing about the mood in Egypt in January 2011, columnist Ahmed El-Sawi (2011) noted that the ‘events in Tunisia have caused people across the region to feel the winds of change’. As CNN put it, ‘winds of change’ swept across the region (Robertson 2011). Analysts later wrote that Egypt’s ‘location at the very heart of the region, with one foot in North Africa and another in the Levant, mean that ripples of political upheaval in Cairo would be felt on the streets of Damascus, Benghazi or Sana’a’ (Noueihed and Warren 2012: 98). The ‘energy, dynamism, and intelligence of the younger generation in the Arab world has been unleashed, after being dammed up by a system which treated them with contempt . . .’ (Khalidi 2012: 10). The protests in Tunisia and Egypt were monumental events in their own countries, but ‘their real revolutionary contribution was their rapid and massive diffusion into a regional tidal wave’ (Lynch 2012: 68). ‘Waves of emotion’ swept across the region and help to explain popular mobilization (Lašas 2011).

What can we learn from such characterizations? In one sense, to describe the spread of the Arab uprisings in terms of ‘waves’ and ‘winds of change’ at this point perhaps borders on cliché. Yet, the sheer ubiquity of these kinds of descriptions points our attention to several important issues of analytical concern. Scholars continue to debate how to account for the processes of diffusion that began in rural Tunisia that rapidly spread across the region. Prominent accounts have rightly focused on factors such as economic and political grievances (Amar and Prashad 2013; Dalacoura 2012: 66; Noueihed and Warren 2012), and the power of social media and satellite television news outlets such as Al Jazeera (Lynch 2011), among other issues. Yet, the presence of social media alone is

likely only one part – albeit a key one – that helps to explain the contagion of the protests. The international or regional balance of power (Ryan 2014), availability of information in protest environments (Weyland 2012), and diffusion effects (Hale 2013; Saideman 2012) have all been argued to play a role in the initiation and spread of the uprisings.

Yet given the complexity of not only the domestic politics within each state but also the multifaceted transnational processes involved in the spread of the uprisings, this article contends that there are dynamics that have been largely overlooked in most accounts. Synthesizing insights from several burgeoning literatures in International Relations (IR) and cognate fields, this article argues that mobilizations of affect are key to understanding the constitution and spread of the Arab uprisings. The article brings together two rapidly growing literatures in IR – on ontological security and affect/emotion – and further develops their insights by drawing upon recent work in neighboring disciplines on ‘circulations of affect’. IR research on ontological security has grown in recent years and generally argues that in addition to traditional concerns about physical security, that actors also seek a secure ‘sense of self’ that forms the foundation for agency (Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008). By striving towards narrative consistency in their self-understandings, agents are able to function and act in contrast to the paralysis and anxiety that inconsistent self-narratives engender. In this sense, the ontological security literature has largely focused on the identity and subjectivity of agents. Yet, many of the key socio-political dynamics of the Arab Spring were arguably not agent-centered but rather trans-agential – the spread of protests across states, the contagion of affective orientations across individuals, and the transmission of embodied affective dispositions during the protests in public spaces across Tunisia, Egypt, and other states.

This poses an interesting puzzle: although existing ontological security research focuses on subjects' search for security, many of the most dynamic processes of the uprisings exceeded individual subjects. The article therefore asks what analytical leverage may be gained by shifting the focus of ontological security away from subjects and towards the more fluid affective conditions and processes out of which security-seeking subjects emerge? As argued below, if it is the case that a cognitively uncertain environment has different effects on subjects' sense of agency and security than the literature contends, then current ontological security research requires rethinking on this question, as it typically focuses on subjects (whether individual or collective) rather than these environments themselves. A non-subject focused approach challenges current ontological security frameworks, and may be better equipped to examine how more amorphous and mobile environmental phenomena such as affects influence political dynamics and set the stage for the emergence of particular ontological security-seeking subjectivities. This is not to deny the importance of studying the ontological (in)securities of subjects, but rather it is to argue that these should not be divorced from the wider cultural-affective milieu out of which subjects initially emerge.

This downplaying of broader environmental phenomena in ontological security research is complemented by a gap in recent trajectories of the growing IR literature on emotions and affect. As many have now argued, IR as traditionally conceived – either as a realist enterprise focused on power politics between states, or as games of calculation played by rational actors – has either neglected emotions as motivations for behavior or dismissed them as deviations from rationality (Mercer 2006). In contrast, recent IR research has demonstrated not only that emotions are key to understanding specific types

of behavior and outcomes (Mercer 2010), but also how affect and emotion bind together allies, communities, and states themselves (Bleiker and Hutchison 2008; Eznack 2011; Sasley 2013; Solomon 2012). Much of this work has focused upon the influence of specific emotions on political outcomes, such as anger (Hall 2011), empathy (Head 2016), humiliation (Saurette 2006), revenge (Löwenheim and Heimann 2008) and trauma (Edkins 2003; Resende and Budryte 2013), among others. In contrast, recent research in social theory suggests that while work on discrete emotions is necessary, such approaches downplay the more ephemeral, fluid, and mobile aspects of affect. Research in political theory (Connolly 2002), cultural studies (Ahmed 2004; Gregg and Seigworth 2010), and geography (Anderson and Harrison 2010) – many drawing inspiration from the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze (Deleuze 1988; Deleuze and Guattari 1983; 2004) – develop the notion of affect as embodied transpersonal movements that both exceed individual subjects and bind together collectives in ways that create conditions of possibility for both the crystallization of social structures and for their contestation. This conceptualization of affect contributes to contemporary IR debates on emotion by offering a model of affective influence on political dynamics that exceed the categories of discrete emotions that guides much of the extant literature (Ross 2014).

This article synthesizes these insights into a new framework for analyzing the affective aspects of ontological security and offers an empirical illustration through circulations of affect in the Arab uprisings. In doing so, firstly, it explores the main question regarding the gap between ontological security theory and practice seen in accounts of the Arab Spring: how does a cognitively unstable environment contribute to, rather than detract from, ontological security? Second, the article unfolds how affect theories challenge

current IR conceptualizations of ontological security, while simultaneously demonstrating what a re-focused ontological security may offer to IR affect theory. A focus on circulations of affect can widen the analytical focus of ontological security to the richness and density of the social environments within which agents pursue securing routines and practices. Conversely, ontological security can offer the emotions/affect literature an effective opening through which to conceptualize how security – the traditional core concern of IR – continually implicates affective dynamics. The final section draws together these conceptual developments to offer an empirical illustration of some of the affective dynamics of the Arab protests that have thus far remained under-examined. It proceeds through a critique of extant political science and IR research on the Arab Spring to emphasize the overlooked dimensions of mobile affective transmissions in the spread of the protests.

Subjects of Ontological Security and Emotion in IR

Giddens's (1991) concept of ontological security focused on the notion that individuals needed to 'bracket' the myriad of incoming everyday information in order to function adequately. To 'answer even the simplest everyday query, or respond to the most cursory remark, demands the bracketing of a potentially almost infinite range of possibilities open to the individual' (Giddens 1991: 36). As Giddens (1991: 243) defined it, ontological security regards the 'sense of continuity' brought about with a 'narrative of the self,' a 'story or stories by means of which self-identity is reflexively understood' (see also Laing 1960). As Kinnvall and Mitzen detail in their introduction (this issue), a growing number of IR scholars draw upon this notion to theorize the links between security and identity (see Berenskoeter and Giegerich 2010; Croft 2012; Kinnvall 2004; Krowlikowski

2008; Lupovici 2012; McSweeney 1999; Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008; Zarakol 2010). In extrapolating the concept to apply to state actors, scholars such as Mitzen (2006: 344) contend that states seek a secure sense of self in addition to traditional physical security concerns. Ontological security is understood as 'security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice'. This security is pursued in a number of ways, such as through the cognitive stability provided by routines (McSweeney 1999; Mitzen 2006), consistent self-narratives (Steele 2008), friendships (Berenskoeter and Giegerich 2010), securitization and desecuritization regarding others (Browning and Joenniemi 2013), and positive and negative identification with others (Roe 2008), among other means.

Despite the relative newness of this literature, there exist a number of divergent approaches regarding how identities are constructed (Rumelili 2013; Zarakol 2010) and how issues of scale are negotiated (Krowlikowski 2008; McSweeney 1999; Steele 2008). As Zarakol (2010: 6-7) details, ontological security has been researched both from the focus on insecurities stemming from a state's internal dynamics and from insecurity in relation to others. Some states may experience insecurity in terms of its own uncertainty about its identity. Here, internal dynamics foster ontological insecurity regarding the overall (in)stability of the collective identity of the state (see Lupovici 2012; Steele 2008). Conversely, other studies contend that ontological (in)security stems not from internal fissures but rather from a state's relationships with others, understood as relational and dependent upon external associations and recognition (see Berenskoeter and Giegerich 2010; Mitzen 2006; Rumelili 2013). Others argue that both the self and its relations are inextricable (Huysmans 1998; Zarakol 2010). Another area of divergence regards levels of

analysis issues, namely, whether ontological security is conceptualized in terms of individuals (Croft 2012; Kinnvall 2004; 748-9) or states and collective actors (Browning and Joenniemi 2013; Lupovici 2012; Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008). Krowlikowski (2008) illustrates the strengths and limitations of both an individual and collective perspective, even if ultimately some notions of ontological security apply to both (see also Roe 2008).

Despite these theoretical divergences, most of these studies explicitly or implicitly accept an actor or subject-centered framework for understanding ontological security. That is, there is usually an assumption of subjects as ontologically insecure, who then seek ontological security. This holds for work along both conceptual axes described above – self-focused or relational identity construction, and individual or collective subjects. To be sure, there is nothing theoretically or empirically incorrect about a focus on subjects when using an ontological security framework. The concept itself has its origins in Laing's (1960) and Giddens's (1991) studies of individual psychology in modernity, both of whom focused on how individual agents experienced ontological insecurities and the means by which they negotiated them. Moreover, even while IR has continually grappled with the ascription of frameworks developed at the individual level applied to corporate actors¹, and although ontological security research has been particularly attentive to this issue, the focus on subjects remains central. Even work that contends that ontological security is a relational dynamic between self and other tends to proceed with a relatively limited understanding of the social environment within which subjects function. For example, Berenskoetter and Giegerich (2010: 422) show that international institutions can act as 'social environments' in which friendships between states are fostered via shared visions of international order. Mitzen views identity as 'constituted and sustained by social

relationships rather than being intrinsic properties of states themselves' (2006: 354), and sees unstable 'cognitive environments' as hindering the 'confident expectations' needed for normal functioning (2006: 342, 345). Rumelili (2013) and Zarakol (2010) view state subjects' relationships with others as crucial to their sense of self. Arguably, even research that contends that identity is not a fixed referent but is rather an ongoing process of 'becoming' (Kinnvall 2004: 748) is subject-focused, even if the focus is on unfixed subjects.

This article draws attention not to the validity or invalidity of this assumption, but rather to the limits of the analytical parameters it produces. These and other studies view ontological security as stretching beyond the subject *to the extent* that they theorize it as relationships with others or as depending upon a stable cognitive environment. Yet, the wider cultural and affective contexts within which these relationships develop – and which often form the background conditions for such relationships – are often downplayed. This is key because it is often the force of wider political environments that shape the emergence of particular kinds of ontological (in)securities. The broader feelings, moods, and charged political atmospheres in the Arab uprisings, for example, arguably helped to condition the kinds of political subjects that emerged during the protests. The transnational and transpersonal movements of affect were 'contagious' insofar as events in one town, city, or region helped to shape, influence, and spark similar events elsewhere. In this sense, current ontological security frameworks are ill-equipped to analyze the relationship between these broader affective environments that often facilitated feelings of security despite the cognitively unstable environments that are typically viewed in the literature as fostering insecurity.

This focus on subjects is mirrored in much of the current work on emotions in IR. This burgeoning literature has aptly demonstrated the myriad of ways in which emotions and affects matter in world politics (Bleiker and Hutchison 2008; Crawford 2000; Eznack 2011; Leep 2010; Mercer 2010; Ross 2013; Sasley 2013; Saurette 2006; Solomon 2015). Of relevance here are two key trends – the focus state-level emotions, and the emphasis on discrete emotional categories. The first mirrors the shortcomings of the subject-centered approach in contemporary ontological security research. The second downplays the conceptual and empirical insights that may be gained by a framework aimed at affective transmissions that exceed more fixed emotional categories.

The recent trend of analyzing emotions as attributes of states sometimes constrains analyses in ways that downplay movements of affect that are not tied to individual subjects. Many of these insightful studies posit emotions as properties of corporate actors that influence their behavior. For example, Hymans (2006) argues that particular emotions are key influences explaining why some states choose to pursue nuclear weapons while some do not. He traces variations in this choice across states to leaders' conceptions of national identity and their corresponding emotions. Hall (2011) develops a state-level theory of anger in which 'state actors – ranging from top leaders, policymakers, officials, and diplomats, to low-ranking soldiers – can collectively project an image of anger through their discourse, symbolic gestures, and concrete actions' (Hall 2011: 532). Similarly, Löwenheim and Heimann's (2008: 690) study on revenge argues that 'corporate actors can experience emotions through the individuals that compose them, identify with them, and are constituted by them'. Eznack (2011: 242) argues that attributing emotions to state actors entails neither the claim that corporate actors themselves experience emotion, nor

that emotions are subject to simply leaders, but rather that emotions attached to alliances entail 'decision makers acting as the state'. In contrast, Sasley (2011: 453-454) uses intergroup emotions theory to argue that focusing on the state as a monolithic actor does not account for the variety of emotional responses within a state, and focusing on individual leaders as representatives of the state, while useful, may be too specific to develop generalizable theories of emotion.

The critique offered here certainly does not suggest that subject- or state-centered work on emotions should cease, nor does it advocate that research on distinct emotions should be supplanted.² Instead, by drawing attention to the limits of some key conceptual assumptions guiding much of the research on ontological security and emotion, this article proposes a shift of focus away from categories of discrete subjects and emotions and towards more fluid affective environments within which agents *emerge as* distinct subjects. Such an approach challenges current work on subject-focused ontological security and discrete emotions, for it is out of affective backgrounds that subjects often coalesce and identifiable emotions become distilled and crystalized. To turn attention to such backgrounds is to 'locate creativity and subjectivity firmly within the circulation of affect – that is, within bodily movement and sensation, and within the emotional atmosphere and tonality of particular situations and relations' (Wylie 2010: 105). The following section develops the notion of 'circulations of affect' and 'affective atmospheres' and their contributions to these contemporary IR debates. The subsequent section then deploys these insights in a critique of existing work on and an analysis of affective movements in the Arab Spring.

Circulations of Affect, Embodiment, and Affective Atmospheres

In many ways IR's current 'emotional turn' has mirrored the growing wider attention to emotions in the social sciences and humanities in recent years. Researchers from a variety of fields have begun to more thoroughly ask questions about how the 'passions' drive embodied social practices (Clough and Halley 2007; Gregg and Seigworth 2010). Of concern here are findings from cognate fields which focus on how emotions are not only properties of individual subjects, but are also relational intensities that extend beyond and exceed individual subjects that can both challenge or solidify existing social arrangements. The notion of 'circulations of affect' is drawn from work in geography and cultural studies, much of which draws inspiration from the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze.³

Deleuze's conceptualization of affect departs significantly from those used in IR political psychology frameworks, which tend to focus on individual emotions. McDermott (2004: 3), for example, states that what 'unifies political psychology and makes it distinct from other forms of political analysis is the search for explanation, description, and prediction at the individual level of analysis'. In this sense, the main contention of IR political psychology 'is that individual people exert decisive impact on the on the outcome of world history and political events' (McDermott 2004: 20). In contrast, Deleuze begins with the contention that affects are inherently social and relational phenomena. In this framework, and in his collaborations with Felix Guattari (1983; 2004), affect concerns the relationship between a body's capacities and wider collective assemblages in the social field. Deleuze contends that the body is not a monolithic unit, but is itself a composition of various kinds of other bodies and relationships that continuously affects and is affected by other bodies. Affect, in this sense, is 'what a body can do and what it can undergo' (Protevi 2010). Or, as Deleuze and Guattari (2004: 283) contend, 'affects are becomings', where

becoming is contrasted with more fixed 'being'. Bodies are always compositions in process, never quite the same from one encounter to the next. Affect is intrinsically bodily and relational. It is an 'ability to affect and to be affected. It is . . . the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act' (Massumi 2004: xvii). Affect thus involves 'variation of the power of acting, an increase or a diminution' (Deleuze 1988: 39). As a 'becoming' between one state and another, affect is 'transitive, and not indicative or representative, since it is experienced in a lived duration that involves the difference between two states' (Deleuze 1988: 49).⁴ Through encounters, a body affects and is affected by other bodies, and affective variations and rhythms ripple throughout the social assemblage (of other bodies, affects, institutions, etc.). Affects 'circulate and are transformed within the assemblage' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 284). As Protevi (2010) explains, Deleuze and Guattari 'operationalize the notion of affect as the ability of bodies to form "assemblages" with other bodies, that is, to form emergent functional structures that conserve the heterogeneity of their components'. Here, then, is the contention that 'a body' is never really individual, but continually affects and is affected by the wider 'circulation of affects' within broader assemblages that help to constitute the body itself (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 287). Such capacities of bodies to affect and to be affected – thereby shaping their capacity to act – was vividly illustrated through many participants' experiences in the Arab protests. One protestor in Egypt, for example, expressed this kind of capacity: there 'was a raised collective consciousness among us. A realization. An epiphany. . . we drew strength, courage, and resolve from one another, from our numbers' (Ghafar 2015: 59).

Scholars in cultural studies have more recently built upon Deleuze's approach by developing the political implications of affects that exceed individual subjects. For Seigworth and Gregg (2010: 1), affect 'arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon'. Affect is relational, yet extends beyond prevailing conceptions of discursively-constructed intersubjectivity found in constructivist and post-positivist IR. It is found 'in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, *and* in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves' (Seigworth and Gregg 2010: 1; see also Clough 2010).⁵ For others, the experiential intensities associated with affect do not merely lend themselves to political effects, but are intrinsically political. Williams (2010: 246) argues that affect is 'an inherently political concept', and 'signals the enmeshing of the political with the corporeal and points to a dynamic process of production and circulation of forces and powers that create and mobilize political subjectivity'. Yet for Williams, de-linking affect from individual subjects who 'have' it to thinking about affect as a movement among bodies offers a more effective framework to analyze the *politics* of affect. Affect 'cannot simply be housed by either body or mind, and is often viewed as overwhelming the subject who experiences it'; it 'signals the degree of intensity moderating a body's motion and mode of communication with other bodies' (Williams 2010: 250, 251). The subject is not absent from such a framework, but is viewed as a performative effect of the intensities among bodies: it 'is through the dispersal and circulation of affects . . . that subjectivity is retroactively produced. In other words, there is no subject of the affect, because affect drives the subject towards identity and performance' (Williams 2010: 258). As discussed below, these links between affective intensities, embodiment, and subjectivity were evident

in the Arab Spring protests. One Egyptian woman, for example, described how the 'policemen in command refused to attack us as we chanted out loud: "Selmeiya, selmeiya (peaceful, peaceful). The more I walked, the more I felt courage running through my veins' (Hany 2015: 68).

In a similar manner, Ahmed's (2004) notion of 'affective economies' draws together some of the more linguistic and performative aspects of such experiences. For her, emotions can be experienced in a pre-linguistic sense; they can be felt by the body before they are described in words. Often, a 'feeling does not simply exist before the utterance, but becomes "real" as an effect, shaping different kinds of actions and orientations' (Ahmed 2004: 13). Words that ostensibly describe emotions can help to bring about their experiences. That emotions and their linguistic representatives are unfixed leads to seeing emotions as movement. Ahmed suggests that movements between signs and emotions bring about 'ripple effects' of emotions: 'they move sideways (through "sticky" associations between signs, figures and objects) as well as forwards and backwards (repression always leaves its trace in the present – hence "what sticks" is bound up with the "absent presence" of historicity)' (Ahmed 2004: 45). Ahmed (2004: 45) argues that such movements produce 'economies of affect' where 'affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced as an effect of its circulation'; the 'more signs circulate, the more affective they become' (Ahmed 2004: 45).

Similar conceptualizations of affect as exceeding individual subjects are offered in research in human geography on affective 'atmospheres'. Thrift's (2008) work on the 'non-representational' aspects of affect attends to its often contagious and ephemeral effects. In collective situations, Thrift (2008: 237) argues, humans have both a capacity and a

tendency to imitate those around them. Bodily gestures, reactions, and affective practices can spread amongst participants sometimes without them fully knowing it. 'Imitation is clearly rapid, automatic and unconscious and involves emotional contagion . . . In particular, people seem to be fundamentally motivated to bring their feelings into correspondence with others: people love to entrain' (Thrift 2008: 237). In such situations, the 'self-other divide can be seen to be remarkably porous [because] across it constantly flow all kinds of emotional signals' (Thrift 2008: 237). Anderson (2009) develops the notion of contagion as 'atmosphere' as a novel way to think about the tensions involved in collective affects. Neither the amalgamation of individual affects nor free-floating phenomena totally unmoored from participants' everyday worlds, atmospheres embody properties which defy simple categorization. It 'is the very ambiguity of affective atmospheres – between presence and absence, between subject and object/subject and between the definite and indefinite – that enable us to reflect on affective experience as occurring beyond, around, and alongside the formation of subjectivity' (Anderson 2009: 77). One can 'sense' the atmosphere of a room, for example, yet it is often inexpressible even to those who feel that they are enveloped by it. It is difficult to linguistically express, but is viscerally sensed. Notions of subject and object blur here, too, since atmospheres are felt by subjects, yet they are not 'located' within any one subject (Adey 2014: 837). Further developing Deleuze and Guattari's (1994: 164) contention that affects 'go beyond the strength of those who undergo them', Anderson (2009: 78) points out that atmospheres are shared affective orientations out of which more defined emotions and formations of subjectivity emerge. At the same time, atmospheres are not determinate; given their ephemerality, they form and dissolve as bodies enter into different relations with each

other (Anderson 2009: 79). As such, even if it cannot (and should not) be claimed that an affective atmosphere 'caused' a specific behavior, they may be important environmental and spatial elements that affect not only participants' self-understandings but also expanded senses of possibility and agency.

In an excellent studies of emotions in IR, Ross (2014: 21) develops the concept of 'circulations of affect' as 'conscious or unconscious transmission[s] of emotion within a social environment'. Drawing upon sociological research, Ross (2013: 22) argues that emotions can travel across individuals in social situations via 'rhythmic entrainment', occurring when participants focus upon a common object and consciously or unconsciously develop common expectations. Ross (2013: 33) argues that identities (as often conceptualized in IR) are not simply a cognitive belief in one's belonging with a group, but is also 'rooted in affective affinities, such as trust, solidarity, or pride, and these are generated also through participation in a community's rituals'. This article both follows and builds upon Ross and returns to concerns over the role of ontological security. Where Ross aims to trace processes of emotion and memory in cases such as post-9/11 politics, ethnic conflict, and post-conflict justice, this article aims to develop how affective circulations and atmospheres are implicated in ontological security.⁶ If it is the case that 'security of the self' is tied affective circulations – and the following section illustrates with evidence from the Arab Spring that it often is – then Ross's framework can be extended to incorporate how such circulations influence agents' feelings of stability or instability.

The argument that circulations of affect and atmospheres are implicated in ontological security challenges several key claims of the extant literature. For example, one claim here is that agency requires cognitive stability in order to be realized. As Mitzen

(2006: 342) contends, uncertainty threatens security of the self because 'agency requires a stable cognitive environment'. Yet, many of the political dynamics of the Arab protests consisted of *unstable* and *insecure* cognitive environments. Although ultimately projecting collective power, protesters in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere faced significant uncertainty over whether the protests would catch on initially, what the reaction of the state might be, and what their fate might be if the protests failed. In this sense, although extant research contends that uncertain environments induce ontological insecurity, this article suggests that shifting and effuse circulations of affect may sometimes bring about new understandings and hopes of ontological *security*. As protesters could not know what the ultimate outcome may be, they nevertheless plausibly felt that the status quo – cognitively stable and predictable yet politically repressive – was challenged through the induction of insecurity. Similarly, this argument poses a challenge to other studies which suggest that 'too strong an emphasis on social context tends to ignore the emotional dimension of subjectivity' (Kinnvall 2004: 752). In contrast, this article contends that the affective environments within which ontological security is sought has been downplayed through a focus on subjects. Yet, the discussion above suggests that many of the visceral aspects of subjectivity are closely tied to the affective milieu out of which subjectivity is constructed. Examining circulations of affect can widen the analytical focus of ontological security to the richness and density of the social environments within which ontological security is sought.⁷ This approach proposes 'a world of incessant non-personal, pre-personal and trans-personal relations of becoming, currents of intensity and affectivities – a world which, in its ongoing creative evolution, refuses to ever really settle down into more familiar patterns of subject and object, animate and inanimate, cause and effect' (Wylie

2010: 105). With this framework in mind, the following section details some of the analytical gaps in existing explanations of the Arab uprisings, and in doing so contends that circulations of affect remain a crucial dimension of the protests.

Circulations of Affect and Affective Atmospheres in the Arab Uprisings

Most explanations in political science and IR of the spread of the Arab protests center around four main factors: the role of new media, regional and international geopolitics, diffusion and demonstration effects, and the role of emotions in decisionmaking. While offering many insights, these explanations leave out – yet sometimes hint at – the role of diffuse transpersonal affects that helped to constitute the charged emotional environments of the movements. Even work that does emphasize emotion in the uprisings tends to deploy an individualistic psychological approach that downplays the fluid and mobile circulation of affects among participants.

First, much work has rightly focused upon the role of social media and satellite television in the spread of the uprisings (Dajani 2012; Khondker 2011; McGarty et al. 2013; Tufekcip and Wilson 2012). In the context of restricted public spheres and state clampdowns on communication, social media such as Facebook and Twitter were indispensable tools for organizing not only devoted activists but wider populations of the middle class, and in fostering a cohesive Arab media space with a common regional language (Lynch 2014: 93). According to Lynch (2014: 99), Al Jazeera ‘explicitly linked together protests across the region into a single narrative, highlighting simultaneous protests on split screens and employing identical language to describe the protagonists in different cases’ (see also Lynch 2011; 2012). Undoubtedly, the role that Al Jazeera and social media played in disseminating regime atrocities⁸ helped to draw international

attention to the protests. Moreover, as Lynch (2014: 102) continues, such global publicity is likely to have raised the costs of repression for state actors, even if such attention did not deter repression in every case. This, in turn, likely drove waves of defections from the state and led many others to withdraw their previous support (Lynch 2014: 102). However, there is likely more to such choices to participate or not participate than rational calculation alone. Emotion is now recognized to be part and parcel of rational cognition (Mercer 2010), and cannot be neatly distinguished from it. In this sense, the visual power of the publicized civilian atrocities and the changing calculations that they likely prompted were likely not due to rational calculation alone, but plausibly involved affective factors that exceeded rationality.

Second, some scholars trace important dynamics of the Arab Spring to traditional geopolitical and balance of power considerations. These explanations emphasize the regional and international security and economic contexts within which the revolutions took place. Ryan (2014) notes how the massive spending on internal security by Arab states helped to contribute to the economic grievances that were part of dissent in nearly every country where protests erupted. Large spending on internal security meant that social welfare and infrastructure were often neglected. As 'regimes became garrison or fortress states, they resisted even small reforms, instead perpetuating their own domestic regime security dilemma' (Ryan 2014: 111). The protests effectively upended many of the region's balances. For example, prior to 2011, traditional power centers such as Baghdad, Damascus, and Cairo had seen their influence wane at the same time the regional power of non-Arab states such as Iran and Israel rose (Ryan 2014: 116). The conflict in Syria amply illustrated this, as it became as much a quasi-proxy conflict amongst outside patrons as it

was between Syrian protesters and the regime (Ryan 2014: 121). Similarly, Hollis (2012) suggests that the European Union's trade policies with Middle Eastern states inadvertently contributed to the uprisings by appearing to be more concerned about harmonizing intra-European interests than with combatting regional human rights abuses (Hollis 2012). Although these analyses help to explain the system-level conditions within which the uprisings took place, they are less focused on delineating the everyday-level affective processes that enveloped participants on the ground.

Third, other work explains the spread of the protests through rational diffusion processes and demonstration effects. Here scholars argue that once the initial protests in Tunisia became widespread in that country and led to the fleeing of Ben Ali, it raised expectations of others across the region that they could also be successful in challenging the state. Protesters emulated each others' tactics, slogans, and movements across countries – in other words, the demonstration effect from the early protests led others in the region to believe in their possibility of success (Patel, Bunce, and Wolchik 2014). Hale (2013: 348) summarizes this literature and argues that for such cascades to occur several factors should align: a common frame of reference for protests, unpopular leaders who are lame ducks, the lack of focal points or options for more institutionalized reform or dissent, and structural conditions that support the coming to power of a new regime type. Weyland (2012) suggests that the disconnect between participants' propensity to engage in protest and the actual limited achievements of the revolutions demonstrates that protesters initially misperceived the political landscapes. He argues that the uprisings 'spread so quickly because many people in a wide range of countries drew rash inferences from the downfall of Tunisia's dictator' (Weyland 2012: 917). While this work is correct to

emphasize the role of diffusion processes in the Arab uprisings, such approaches likely overestimate the role of rational cognition in decision-making during these processes. By emphasizing decision-making as a rational cognitive process (even via heuristics and shortcuts), these studies neglect the role of emotion and affect as catalysts in both individual-level calculations over whether to participate in revolutionary behavior and in collective-level effects in the spread of the movements.

In this sense, studies on emotion in the uprisings aim to explain gaps in rationalist perspectives (Asad 2012; Benksi and Langman 2013; Pearlman 2013). While fear – of potentially negative outcomes, of regime responses, of revolutionary disruptions to everyday life – no doubt played a large part in the uprisings (Asad 2012), a wider array of emotions are arguably vital in understanding their sparking and spread. Benski and Langman (2013) argue that in response to work that focuses on single emotions in political mobilization, research should instead widen the analytical lens to ‘constellations of emotions’ that include not only fear and anger but also anxiety and hope. Similarly, Pearlman (2013) argues that emotions affect individuals’ calculations regarding whether or not to engage in protest. Cost-benefit calculations on whether to engage in protest offer contrasting guidance at different times: sometimes cost-benefit analyses discourage protests, at other times they encourage despite high costs and uncertain outcomes (Pearlman 2013: 389). To address this conundrum, Pearlman analyzes the emotional ‘microfoundations’ of protest, and distinguishes between two sets of emotions: dispiriting (such as fear, sadness, and shame, leading to pessimistic judgments about protest actions) and emboldening (such as anger or joy, which lead to assertive behavior). Pearlman (2013: 392) contends that ‘mass rebellion is improbable to the degree that dispiriting emotions

prevail among a population, and emboldening emotions can drive defiance despite strategic disincentives’.

These emotions-based analyses of the Arab Spring significantly expand our understanding of the events beyond the remit of rationalist frameworks. This article builds upon these insights not by attempting to ‘falsify’ their claims but rather by attending to the questions that their astute analyses raise. These studies, despite their insights, tend to conceptualize emotions as individual-level characteristics (Benski and Langman 2013: 531, 533-4; Pearlman 2013: 388). Through the lens of the discussion above, they tend to view emotions as centered in a subject, and hence do not exhaust the ways in which emotions shape collective events such as popular uprisings. If emotions are subjective as these scholars suggest, they are also intersubjective – arising in the interactions of individuals yet not reducible to them – and therefore are, in a sense, not centered in an individual subject.⁹

In this sense, circulations of affects and atmospheres amongst and between subjects remain an underexamined dimension of the constitution and contagion of the Arab uprisings.¹⁰ Many participants themselves described their experiences of the protests in such terms. For example, the co-movement of language and emotion through ‘economies of affect’ as detailed by Ahmed (20014) helps to account for the spread of collective protest chanting from Tunisia to Egypt. ‘The people want the fall of the regime’ was a common cry across Tunisia before it spread to Egyptian cities (Reuters 2011). As Al Ahram (2011) news reported, Egyptians were ‘empowered by Tunisia’s uprising’ and the first day of the protests in Egypt heard repeated chanting of *thawra* or ‘revolution’: *thawra hatta an-nasr; thawra fi Tunis; thawra fi Masr* – ‘Revolution until victory; revolution in Tunisia; revolution in Egypt’. Others chanted much more pointedly toward the leader: ‘revolution, revolution,

like a volcano, against Mubarak the coward' (Siddique, Owen, and Gabbatt 2011). The spread of events from Tunisia to Egypt and elsewhere was more than a calculation of prospective costs and benefits, but was palpable on an intimately embodied level. One participant in Cairo expressed this vividly. 'This is what freedom *feels like*. What a great day for Egypt . . . it was impossible to rally like this before, but today I knew I had to come out. This is our Tunisia (Shenker 2011a, emphasis added). Other Egyptians simply chanted 'Tunisia, Tunisia' (Siddique, Owen, and Gabbatt 2011). As Lynch (2012: 69) details, 'the momentum of events traveled quickly and easily across borders . . . Protesters developed a very powerful pan-Arabist outlook even as they focused their energies on domestic change – and saw no contradiction between the two. They adopted identical slogans, such as *Irhal* [Leave!] or *Al-Shaab Yureed Isqat al-Nisam* [*The People Want to Overthrow the Regime*] became the lingua franca of Arab society'. Ahmed's (2004) framework suggests that economies of affect rippled across Arab social space and helped to shape both discourse and embodied dispositions. Signs and emotions 'move sideways (through "sticky" associations between signs, figures, and objects) as well as forwards and backwards' (Ahmed 2004: 45). Signs such as 'Tunisia', 'the people demand the fall of the regime', and 'revolution' carried both meaning and affect with them. Once linked to a particular series of events in Tunisia, 'the people demand the fall of the regime' became a common sign across the Middle East, reflecting both participants' impressions of the meaning of the events in Tunisia, but also encapsulated the affects associated with their own domestic protests. In Egypt, 'Tunisia, Tunisia' was not simply a neutral geographic descriptor, but a sign that carried with it meanings and affect from Tunisia and became grafted by participants into their own social context. 'We want to see change just like in Tunisia,' said

one young Egyptian woman (Siddique, Owen, and Gabbatt 2011). ‘The noisy crowd was joined by cars driving alongside and honking their horns. People cried “Long Live a Free Tunisia”, and waving Tunisian and Egyptian flags while police initially stood on the crowd’s periphery’ (Siddique, Owen, and Gabbatt 2011). In Ahmed’s (2004: 45) sense, these signs and their affects ‘moved sideways’ across settings and meanings – they became unmoored from their original setting in Tunisia, yet also shifted meanings to become enmeshed within a different national context. The ‘more signs circulate, the more affective they become’ (Ahmed 2004: 45) – with ‘revolution’, ‘Tunisia’ and other signs such affectively-tinged circulation was on display in the collective chanting seen in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere.

Circulations of affect also helped to produce the atmospheres that characterized many of the protests. Participants’ descriptions of their experiences of the uprisings frequently referred to the atmospheres of the demonstrations, and the particular spaces in which the uprisings occurred which helped to shape their experiences. Schwedler and Ryan (2014: 163) argue that ‘rather than thinking of cities as merely spaces in which a concentration of citizens reside (and sometimes protest), we can think of them as assemblages of social, economic, political, geographic, and infrastructural entities that structure everyday practices even as those practices give meaning to those very places’.¹¹ One young Egyptian described his feeling: ‘Tahrir Square – the focus of the protests in Cairo – was like heaven. It was how you wanted Egypt to be’ (Shaw 20F11). *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof described the space of the square in similar terms. ‘Tahrir is the most exhilarating place in the world’; the ‘giddiness’ of the square was palpable to outsiders and locals alike (Kristof 2011). The atmosphere was often described as carnival-esque and welcoming. ‘At night the atmosphere was almost festive as more protesters

arrived and settled in. Some lay in the grass, others formed circles to talk, a few major politicians, including Ayman Nour, gave speeches' (*The Guardian* 2011a). 'It was an optimistic, celebratory atmosphere' in Tahrir even before Mubarak stepped down (*The Guardian* 2011b). 'The atmosphere is simply amazing – everyone is so friendly, there's no anger, no harassment, just solidarity and remarkable energy' (Siddique, Owen, and Gabbatt 2011). There was a 'feeling of intense excitement on the streets' in a northern Cairo suburb as protesters marched past armed security forces (Siddique, Owen, and Gabbatt 2011). However, another Egyptian described the change in a crowd's encounter with security forces in a square in Cairo: 'In the streets around Abdel Munim Riyad square the atmosphere had changed. The air which had held a carnival-like vibe was now thick with teargas' (Shenker 2011b). Yet elsewhere the "energy was so overwhelming I cried – so peaceful, hopeful, and powerful . . . The atmosphere was so powerful that without seeing it for oneself, words cannot really pay it justice' (Wiens 2015: 92).

While these affective movements shifted during the demonstrations, many articulated their experiences of not only physical insecurity but also the cognitively unstable environment and ontological (in)security of the broader social order. For example, at the outbreak of violence there, one Tunisian woman described how:

We were accustomed to a sense of stability, so I did not expect that something would go wrong. I could not fathom that a Tunisian Arab and Muslim would be capable of murdering his Tunisian countrymen. It was inconceivable for me that a Tunisian like me would consider me an enemy . . . At that time I felt like the world had turned upside down, because every government backer turned out to be the enemy of every Tunisian citizen (Yazidi 2015: 27).

Normalized categories marking everyday stabilities were often overturned during the protests. Yet – crucially – these feelings of ontological insecurity were also met with senses of security stemming from the affective dynamics of the events. One Egyptian recounted:

'then the most incredible thing happened. The riot police turned back and started running for their lives . . . we all knew that something profound had just taken place. There was a raised collective consciousness among us. A realization. An epiphany. . . we drew strength, courage, and resolve from one another, from our numbers' (Ghafar 2015: 59). The embodied experience of collective presence heightened such feelings. 'At some checkpoints,' a woman in Alexandria recounted, 'the policemen in command refused to attack us as we chanted out loud: "Selmeiya, selmeiya (peaceful, peaceful). The more I walked, the more I felt courage running through my veins' (Hany 2015: 68). In Tahrir, 'by nightfall, we could kick the black uniforms out of the square and the masses cheered. With the police rows stationed outside, we started screaming our demands and chanting new songs. It was a moment of self-realization' (al-Abd 2015: 80). These embodied affective experiences helped to shape such capacities for action. Such encounters involved 'variation of the power of acting, an increase or a diminution' (Deleuze 1988: 39). Here, these bodily encounters affected the participants through, in their words, an increase in feelings of agency and power.

Deleuze and Guattari (1994: 164) argue that affects 'go beyond the strength of those who undergo them'. This seems to capture some of the more mobile, diffuse, yet embodied orientations and dispositions in which participants felt themselves enveloped. As Anderson (2009: 78) points out, atmospheres are shared affective dispositions out of which more defined emotions and subjectivities can emerge. Atmospheres are 'felt' by subjects yet are not 'located' within any particular subject (Adey 2014: 837). In this sense, it is notable that participants often tried to articulate a personal sense of becoming that was rooted in the revolutionary atmospheres. One person during the early Syrian

demonstrations described the embodied physicality associated with this feeling. ‘But today, with the massive demonstrations, I feel that I truly own myself and my freedom; sometimes I turn to my friends in the demonstration and kiss them as we exchange congratulations’ (Zeitouneh 2011). An Egyptian expressed similar feelings prior to Mubarak’s fall. ‘For the first time in my life, I really count, my voice is heard. Even though I’m only one person, this is the way real democracy works’ (*The Guardian* 2011b). At another Cairo protest one person said, ‘This is the march to freedom I’ve been waiting for all my life’ (Saddique, Owen, and Gabbatt 2011).¹²

The particular context and affective atmospheres of the demonstrations helped to foster the emergence of new subjectivities for participants and renewed feelings of ontological security. A key issue to note here is the process through which these expressions of personal transformation and secure sense of self were experienced. The affective circulations and atmospheres were not simply epiphenomenal to these processes, but rather were paramount in the production of new ontological security-seeking subjectivities. ‘Affect’, in this sense, is a ‘continuous but highly differentiated field that is “out of phase” with formed entities (that is, has a different topology and causal order from the “individuals” which arise from it and whose forms return to it)’ (Massumi’s 2002: 34). In these revolutionary contexts, ‘creativity and subjectivity [set] firmly within the circulation of affect – that is, within bodily movement and sensation, and within the emotional atmosphere and tonality’ of the demonstrations (Wylie 2010: 105). The transpersonal and embodied circulations of affects constituted mobile energies out of which more defined subjectivities were formed during the course of the demonstrations. Such circulations were ‘out of phase’ (in Massumi’s terms) with defined or fixed

subjectivities – affective atmospheres and circulations are not ‘contained’ within any subject. Yet subjects ‘arose’ from and ‘returned’ to it (Massumi 2002: 34), both in the sense that the revolutionary atmospheres helped to form new subjects and with subjects referring back to their own experiences of the atmospheres and circulations as the constituting context for personal becoming. Such atmospheres circulated across the region with similar (but certainly not identical) effects. As Lynch (2012: 68-9) notes, on ‘an average Friday [day of prayer] in February 2011, virtually every city in the Arab world marched to the same beat, chanting the same slogans, watching each other, and feeding off a shared energy within a shared narrative’.

The implications for ontological security here challenge much of the current literature. A key contention of the literature is that cognitively stable social environments are necessary for subjects to have a secure sense of self and hence a sense of agency. As Mitzen (2006: 342, 345), argues, unstable ‘cognitive environments’ hinder the ‘confident expectations’ needed for agents’ normal functioning. Uncertainty threatens security of the self because ‘agency requires a stable cognitive environment’ (Mitzen 2006: 342). Yet, empirical evidence from the Arab protests suggest that in key revolutionary moments, this may not be the case. In many cases, protesters were under no illusions about what they may face during the demonstrations. In Tunisia, the government of President Ben Ali allowed no opposition and his security forces had essentially free reign to crush dissent of any kind (Bamyeh 2012). Egypt’s political environment had become somewhat looser during the 2000s, which saw protests and demonstrations of various sizes, yet all were quashed or otherwise successfully co-opted by the Mubarak government (Noueihed and Warren 2012: 105). The status quo may have been cognitively stable and predictable, yet it

was also politically repressive. An uncertain revolutionary context, on the other hand, not knowing precisely what may occur (even if previous protests were unsuccessful) was mitigated by the particular affective environments of the demonstrations themselves. Many participants felt an enhanced sense of ontological security within the revolutionary affective atmospheres *despite* their cognitive uncertainty and unpredictability. Their secure sense of self, in this manner, seems to have derived at least in part from the particular features of the affective circulations and atmospheres felt in Tunis, Cairo, and elsewhere. Participants' feelings of ontological security were intimately embedded within these circulations of affect and atmospheres which exceeded individual subjects, and their personal expressions of 'becoming' were attributed by them to the affective atmospheres within which they felt themselves enveloped.

Conclusion

While many lessons can be drawn from the Arab Spring protests and their aftermath, this article argues that they offer particular insights for IR scholars interested in the intersections of ontological security, affect and emotion, and subjectivity. It contends that substantial gaps appear in the IR ontological security literature when faced with the empirical observation of Arab Spring participants' sense of increased ontological security within unstable cognitive environments. The article argues that due to the focus on subjects in the extant ontological security literature, and the emphasis on discrete emotions in the emotions/affect literature, both largely neglect the novel role of transpersonal affective movements in the protests. Circulations of affect and affective atmospheres are phenomena that do not reside 'in' any one subject but rather exceed individual subjects, and helped to produce the affective conditions that gave rise to new

subjectivities and new senses of becoming in the protests. This new framework challenges existing work on ontological security and affects by focusing upon the movements and emergent capacities of affective atmospheres and circulations. In doing so, it contends that a re-focused ontological security framework can yield a range of conceptual and empirical insights that can carry the literature to productive new questions.

The article also leaves open several questions surrounding these issues. First, the relationship between circulations of affect and atmospheres and other kinds of transnational diffusion processes remain ripe for further development. As recent work on diffusion tends to focus on the more cognitive and deliberative aspects of policy imitation and innovation (Solingen 2012), future work might address the more affective transmissions by which diffusion functions. If, as this paper argues, diffusion consists not only of conscious policy imitation but also emotional and affective movements that help to construct subjectivities and ontological security, then the overlap between movements of affect and policy beliefs is ripe for further analysis (see Mercer 2010). Second, and following Ross (2014), the article suggests emotions research in IR should also examine both the processes by which distinct emotions may dissolve into more diffuse circulations of affect and affective atmospheres, and how such diffuse environments may crystallize into more definable emotions. Given the ubiquity of such phenomena in everyday life, affective circulations and atmospheres likely play a larger role in the fuzzy politics of emotions that the field has so far acknowledged.

¹ See the forum on 'Is the State a Person?' in *Review of International Studies* 2004, 30(2).

² Moreover, not all emotions research focuses on single emotions. Additionally, some ontological security research explores emotions, such as honor and shame (Steele 2008) and anxiety (Kinnvall 2004; Mitzen 2006), yet tends to analytically focus on subjects. Orthogonally, Innes (2015) helpfully directs attention to transnational processes of ontological security in migration politics, yet downplays other explicit emotional and affective aspects.

³ Although a major figure in 20th century poststructuralism across the humanities and social sciences, Deleuze-inspired work has only recently begun to appear in IR. See, for example, Lenco (2013), Evans and Reid (2013), Parker (2009), and the 2010 special issue of *Journal of International Relations and Development* 13(4). While Deleuze's philosophy is wide-ranging, this article limits the discussion to his conceptualization of affect.

⁴ Deleuze draws upon Spinoza in developing this understanding of affect. See also Beasley-Murray (2010) and Colebrook (2005: 198).

⁵ For insightful critiques of the 'turn to affect' in cultural studies and social theory, see Hemmings (2005) and Leys (2011).

⁶ An intriguing use of a similar notion of "affective apparatus" is found in Steele's (2013) examination of revenge in US celebrations of Osama bin Laden's death in May 2011.

⁷ Given the variety of different outcomes across states in the uprisings, the question arises as to why circulations of affect sometimes "succeed" and other times "fail" to bring about social change. While this question is beyond the scope of this paper, future studies would need to account for such shifts in affective conditions.

⁸ The 2010 killing of Khaled Said by Egyptian police was a major catalyst for the January 2011 revolution. See Vargas (2012) on how Wael Ghonim's Facebook tribute to Said become a focal point for the Egyptian protests.

⁹ Pearlman (2013: 396) hints at this aspect of affect but downplays it her analysis: the 'exuberant crowd feelings [in Tunis] galvanized once unimaginable boldness [and] suggests a "power in numbers" that went beyond the size of the crowd. Not mere arithmetic, the joy of acting in concert gave the assembly a force greater than the sum of its parts'. If emotions influenced individuals' judgments about the prospects of revolution, mobile affects that exceeded individual subjects helped to constitute an overall milieu, or 'force greater than the sum of [individual] parts', as a mood or atmosphere.

¹⁰ Spatially, this section emphasizes the importance of everyday-level contexts in tracing circulations and atmospheres of affect, and follows recent work in IR on the everyday (Guillaume 2011; Sylvester 2013). Temporally, the empirical examples are primarily drawn from the period of January to February 2011, when the impact of the Tunisian uprisings was being incorporated into the Egyptian context.

¹¹ For more on the spatial politics of the protests, see Gregory (2013) and Solomon and Steele (2016).

¹² Yet, such accounts must be contrasted against specific types of harassment and violence against women during the protests. See Johansson-Nogués (2013).

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