

## Conference Sketch

### **Democracy and Development in the Middle East After the Arab Spring November 4 - November 5, 2011 Asan Institute for Policy Studies**

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“Democracy and Development in the Middle East After the Arab Spring” examined the multiple domestic and international dimensions of the political and social turbulence that has unfolded in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) since January 14, 2011. On that day, Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali was forced to quit power following close to a month of protest and popular demonstration. That event triggered widespread protests in other Arab states, shaking the foundations of some, though not all, of the most enduring authoritarian regimes in the world. The conference brought together fourteen international experts in the field, and focused on a number interlaced dimensions of the Arab Spring organized under four broad themes: 1) Defining and situating the Arab Spring; 2) Domestic socio-economic and political variation and the Arab Spring; 3) Political Islam and the Arab Spring; 4) The role and shape of U.S. foreign policy before, during, and after the Arab Spring.

#### **Theme One: Defining and Situating the Arab Spring**

What is the Arab Spring? Is it a singular or multiple processes? Is it an event that happened and may be essentially over or ending, or is it in fact the beginning of a long-term historical process? While the general feeling of conference participants was “it’s too early to say,” Fawaz Gerges suggests the Arab Spring might simply be characterized as the profound change of mood and perception that has seized Arab citizen and regime alike since January 14, 2011. Gerges’ characterization may also define the limits of the Tunisian ‘demonstration effect’ so widely discussed by analysts and policy makers just a few months ago. As conference participants stressed, it is too early to claim that the Arab Spring is a ‘domino effect’ of democratization in the Middle East and North Africa, paralleling earlier democratization trends in Latin American and Eastern Europe. Only three authoritarian leaders have been forced from power, and only one of those states has entered the transition process. Saudi military intervention seems to have crushed the Bahraini opposition. Regime and opposition in Syria and Yemen appear to have entered a protracted and bloody stalemate, where the outcome is far from clear, whereas most of the other regimes in the region appear to have successfully navigated the waves of popular demonstrations that spread from Tunis between January and March 2011.

Describing an intra-regional political phenomenon that is occurring in multiple states at different velocities, the term ‘Arab Spring’ is overdetermined. Drawing from the examples of conference participants, one way of conceptually simplifying the ‘Arab Spring’ phenomenon is to broadly distinguish between two distinct temporal processes: regime change / dynamics (or continuity) and transition.

Focusing on regime change, Lisa Anderson suggests that we look closely at the role ‘timing and place’ played in Egypt and Tunisia, the “early adopters.” The intensity

and size of the initial wave of popular protest in January 2011 took those regimes and international community by surprise – neither had a road map to navigate unprecedented pressure from the street. Initial political missteps of both Tunis and Cairo sharply reduced their capacity to endure the storm of protests. The West abandoned Ben Ali after the third week of mass demonstrations. Tunisia has never been a key regional strategic ally. Hesitating between Obama’s “A New Beginning” 2009 Cairo speech and its historic Middle East strategy, the American position vis-à-vis protest movement and Mubarak regime alike wavered in the initial days of protest in Egypt. Perhaps American inaction induced Mubarak to make the wrong political calculations, increasingly alienating the Egyptian citizen, military and the United States, and ultimately leading to his forced resignation.

While a Tunisia-inspired regime change ‘demonstration effect’ seems to be circumscribed to the Egyptian case, the “neighborhood effect” is salient in the post-Mubarak Arab Spring. Regional and international considerations, which historically played a role in the persistence of authoritarianism in the region but which had seemingly been sidelined by the shock effect of the January protests, returned to the fore in March, April, and May 2011, as regional and international players became involved in the battles pitting incumbent regimes against mass demonstration. In Bahrain and Libya, for example, oil and other strategic dimensions were at stake. Here, regional and international forces entered what had hitherto been domestic disputes, though they did so in divergent ways. NATO coordinated airstrikes with the Qatari-armed Transitional National Council to undermine Muammar Qaddafi in Libya, whereas Saudi Arabia sent troops to Bahrain to support al-Khalifa’s crackdown on popular protest. Qatar’s intervention in Libya indicates that the hydrocarbon rich micro-monarchy plans to play an increasingly important role in regional foreign policy, whereas Saudi Arabia has made it clear that it will not tolerate democratizing reform in its backyard, the GCC. Damascus’ strategic position between Israel, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, along with the specter of a fragmented, if not Balkanized post al-Assad Syria seems to have, at least temporarily, kept regional and international intervention at arms-length. Summing the ‘neighborhood effect,’ as Lisa Anderson stressed, “Where you live matters in terms of what options you have as a regime facing opposition, or as the opposition.”

The second process packed into the term ‘Arab Spring’ is political transition. Though Eva Bellin rightly stressed that discussion of political transition appears premature, participants underscored a number of factors that could be important to Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, if not future transitioning regimes: antecedent institutional development and the demonstration effects of successful transition in neighboring states. Anderson, Bellin, and Clement Henry stressed that a history of bureaucratic development will likely prevent Egypt and Tunisia from falling into post-authoritarian chaos: the regime is gone but the state remains. Those same state institutions, however, might also block democratic transition. Bassam Haddad soberly notes ‘regime change’ might not be the correct word for describing post-Mubarak Egypt: the military and many other key institutions and players remain in power, and may well subvert liberalizing reform. Whether this will transpire or not, Egypt and Tunisia stand in stark contrast to Libya, where Qaddafi de-institutionalized the state while encouraging tribal and regional cleavages, leaving the post-Qaddafi country in what one participant described as “an institutional wasteland.” Indeed, given the Transitional National Council’s tandem task of

nation-building and state-building, Diederik Vandewalle remains skeptical of the short-term prospects of a democratic transition in Libya.

Transitions in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia could also affect the domestic politics of their neighbors. Arguing that Algeria does not seem at risk to regime change pressures from the street, Robert Parks suggests that the outcome of the Tunisian transition could nevertheless profoundly reconfigure Algerian politics. A successful Tunisian transition led by the Islamist En-Nahda party could have a two-fold demonstration effect. On the one hand, it would show Algerians that political Islamists can play by the democratic rules of the game; on the other hand, it could push Algerian Islamists to re-think both strategy and discourse. A failed En-Nahda-led transition, however, will likely confirm the Algerian political class' suspicions of political Islam.

## **2) Domestic Socio-Economic and Political Variation in the Arab Spring**

Much of the conference focused on the impact specific socio-economic and political variations have had in explaining the intensity of mass demonstrations and the regime's margin of maneuver in the different MENA states.

Steven Heydemann highlighted a common structural feature of the Arab Spring: a deep popular memory of the State's appropriate role matched with intense economic grievance, partly based on a perceived increase in corruption, economic exclusion, and unemployment. While the state's role in the economy has been slowly diminished over the last thirty years, Heydemann argued that the state's ability to implement social justice and guarantee economic security has plunged over the past decade in most MENA states. The declining quality of life is degrading and has touched the Arab citizen's basic dignity, or *karama*. 'Karama protests' have been a critical factor animating the Arab Spring, beginning with Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia. Bassam Haddad's reflection on Syria captured this succinctly: initial Friday protests were at least partly linked to the perception the al-Assad regime had ceded public policy to economic liberals. However, while economic grievances are necessary, a number of scholars noted that they do not seem to be a sufficient condition to transform economic disgruntlement into anti-regime political protests: in several states, on-going and widespread economic protests have yet to coalesce into political demonstrations.

Parsing Arab regimes by the development of their financial sectors, Clement Henry too approaches the Arab Spring through an economic lens, suggesting three broad political economic regime types, each with varying degrees of exposure to or insulation from Arab Spring momentum: 'Arab Monarchies,' 'Bully Republics' and 'Bunker Regimes.' Arab Monarchies have been the least affected by the Arab Spring, echoing Eva Bellin's suggestion that the truisms of the 'persistence of authoritarianism' literature still seem to hold in these polities. The GCC states, Jordan, and Morocco have resorted to a time-tested repertoire of political strategies: monarchs appear to have stayed above the fray by cultivating legitimacy linked to tradition and by distributing economic largess. Saudi Arabia has injected billions of dollars into its economy, while the Jordanian and Moroccan monarchs have promised to 'force' their parliaments to deepen democratizing reform.

To date the Arab Republics appear to be facing the storm alone. Henry argues we broadly divide the republics by the structure of their banking system, suggesting Bully Republics have more developed banking and financial systems than Bunker Regimes.

The more developed economies of Bully Republics, he argues, have a developing division of labor, and thus denser civil societies than Bunker Regimes. While ‘bullied’ by the regime, associational life nevertheless has persisted in the Bully Republics, straddling clandestinity and formal recognition. When the wave of protests hit Tunisia and Egypt, civil society surged from the shadows, and emboldened protester calls for regime change. Mohammed Kerrou’s discussion on the development of social networks in Tunisia provides a salient example to this. Over the past decade, disgruntled Tunisians took to the web to express their frustration with corruption and authoritarianism. When riots broke out in Sidi Bouzid in December 2010, cyber dissidents projected the images of regime violence over Facebook and Twitter, generating widespread popular revulsion, breaking the antecedent cycle of fear. These networks helped mobilize trade unions, students, and professional associations. Similar events transpired in Egypt in late January and February 2011.

The under-developed civil societies of the Bunker Regimes are less able to articulate political and economic grievances. While Syrian protesters seem to have largely avoided organization along sectarian lines to date, in Libya and Yemen, tribal politics have surged to the fore. That regime-opposition mobilization has begun to fall along tribal lines might explain the intensity of violence in Yemen. The lack non-governmental articulation mechanisms linking state and society also hinders negotiation by hardening positions. Indeed both Dirk Vandewalle and Haddad’s discussions of Libya and Syria underscored the development of an ‘all or nothing’ perception at the upper echelons of power at the outset of mass demonstrations.

Breaking the trend, three MENA republics have witnessed remarkably little political protest: Algeria, Iran, and Lebanon. Arang Keshavarzian and Robert Parks argue that the relatively open nature of the Iranian and Algerian regimes have absorbed or demobilized demands for regime change, though in different ways. Keshavarzian suggests that the Iranian regime is able to manage elite conflict through formal and informal institutions, using a robust repertoire of political strategies, including elite bargaining and horse-trading, patronage and redistribution, popular parliamentary and presidential elections, as well as violence, coercion and intimidation. Rather than a call for regime change, the violent outcome of the June 2009 presidential elections reflects the tension between current centralizing trends and long standing social and political transformations that has expanded the size of the Iranian elite. The last two decades of Algeria politics have been characterized by a proliferation of a relatively vocal independent press and multiplication of civil society groups and political parties that have real room to publically criticize the government. Parks suggested, however, that the toothless nature of the parliament as well as political parties and civil society’s inability to address citizen demands has increasingly demobilized the population. Parties and civic groups are no longer viewed as credible articulation mechanisms linking the citizen to the state, and have been altogether bypassed in favor of neighborhood riots and sectoral strikes, thus confirming Heydemann’s suggestion of deep-rooted economic malaise, while explaining the absence of anti-regime protests.

Extant economic grievances, size and development of civil society, and regime type are all factors that explain why some regimes have fallen, others are barely holding together, while still others appear insulated from Arab Spring pressures.

### **3) Political Islam and the Arab Spring**

Political Islam has always been the boogeyman in the Arab World; Arab regimes and their international backers have long used the specter of Islamic extremism and terrorism to justify authoritarian practices. However, in January and February 2011, neither the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood nor Tunisian Islamists appeared to have been at the forefront of the Arab Spring protests that forced Ben Ali and Mubarak from power. Nor has boogeyman al-Qaeda captured or been able to surf the anti-regime momentum since. This led some pundits to talk about a post-Islamist era. Recent events in both states, however, have shown that while extremism is at an impasse, mainstream political Islam is hardly extinguished as a political force in the Arab World: Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood is increasingly flexing its muscles, and the Islamist En-Nahda party in Tunisia won a majority of seats in the October 2011 Constituent Assembly elections.

Fawaz Gerges notes that while the Islamist movement has matured considerably over the last eighty years, political Islamist parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood and En-Nahda will face a number of hurdles as they integrate the political scene – hurdles that none had been forced to jump when excluded from the political mainstream. For example, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood will have to negotiate serious generational differences over ideas and strategies, if it hopes to maintain political unity in the future. Hitherto excluded from politics, the movement does not seem to have developed clear economic or political positions that can define domestic politics or geo-strategically situate Egypt. And while the Tunisian En-Nahda party and Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood movement have accepted the rules of the political game, both have unclear visions of the relationship between civil society and the State. As such, Gerges suggests, Arab Islamists are unable to conceptually create a baseline by which voters can measure their project, other than by taking their word.

This may change, however, as they are forced to tackle pressing economic and political issues once in power. Indeed, Jang Ji-Hyang asks whether legal status and increased Islamist involvement in business activity might clarify the positions of mainstream Islamist political movements. Citing the case of the Turkish Islamist movement, Ji-Hyang suggests capitalism can co-opt and moderate political Islam. The 'Anatolian tigers' have been a major source of financing for Turkish political Islamists over the last thirty years. As the impact of their fund-raising activities has increased, these 'Green Capitalists' have pushed the Islamist leadership to answer hard questions, forcing it to make political compromises and to moderate populist and moralistic rhetoric. This thirty-year process, Ji-Hyang suggests, has culminated in three successive AKP electoral victories. Looking at the same case, however, Kemal Kirisci is unsure that a 'Turkish model' of political Islam can be exported to the Arab World. Given the idiosyncratic development of Turkish politics, as well as ongoing tensions within the Turkish polity over the role of Islam in the public sphere, Kirisci is skeptical of a 'Turkish model,' suggesting that the Turkish demonstration effect is as far as we can go. Supporting this argument, he points to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's reaction to Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan's recent call for a secular state founded on personal Muslim conviction. The speech reverberated throughout the Arab World, leading former Algerian Prime Minister Abdelaziz Belkhadem to argue that the 'Malaysian model' of Muslim development might be better suited for Arabs than the AKP and Turkish experience.

#### **4) The Role and Shape of U.S. Foreign Policy in the Region Before, During, and After the Arab Spring.**

The last major theme discussed at “Democracy and Development in the Middle East After the Arab Spring” was the role and shape of U.S. foreign policy. The Arab Spring highlights many of the inconsistencies in the US foreign policy, Michael Hudson suggests, partly because policy makers are confused on many of the points discussed elsewhere in the conference: Is the Arab Spring change or continuity? Is it a democratic transition? Is it still happening? What are its long-term implications? Is it singular or plural? Whatever the case, the Arab Spring has brought to the fore long-standing contradictions in US-Middle East policy, which has historically been based on secure access to oil, a strategic alliance with Israel, and fighting the ‘War on Terror.’

Part of the tension revolves around the spirit of Obama’s 2009 “A New Beginning” Cairo speech, and how it should be applied, if at all, in the context of the Arab Spring. While the spirit seems to have been implemented vis-à-vis Tunisia, the same spirit wavered when it came to dealing with Mubarak (and Saleh in Yemen). And it certainly has not been applied in the cases of Bahrain or Palestine. Mubarak was viewed as a strategic ally in maintaining the 1978 Camp David Accords, and was abandoned once the U.S. administration reached an agreement with the Egyptian military: shed Mubarak, keep the peace with Israel, and continue to enjoy the financial rent of the peace dividend. However, shedding Mubarak created a new set of problems. Popular opinion in Egypt is more important now than it ever has been, and appears is in favor of pushing the military into the barracks, and in re-evaluating Egyptian-Israeli ties. The Obama administration now walks a fine line: it is encouraging a transition that its main partner, the military, wishes to control from above. As a result of these ongoing tensions, the United States is at a record low in Egyptian public opinion.

The U.S. Administration’s veto of the Security Council vote to accept Palestine into the United Nations and the recent withdrawal of U.S. funding to UNESCO too go against the Obama Cairo speech. The veto and UNESCO scandal, Uzi Rabi notes, have signaled to Palestinians that the United States can no longer play the role of a third party arbiter in the Palestine-Israel conflict. Palestinians are actively seeking new negotiation partners, eroding U.S. hegemony over the peace processes.

Hudson and Rabi also noted that abandoning Mubarak affected U.S. relations with key strategic partner Saudi Arabia, in multiple ways. On the one hand, Mubarak’s fall may have signaled to Saudi rulers that they could no longer absolutely count on American military and political support. If the Americans could abandon Mubarak in Egypt, what would prevent them from defending the House of Ibn Saud? On the other hand, the lack of a clear American policy on the Arab Spring has forced the Saudis to unilaterally adopt a regional foreign policy for its own back yard, the GCC. While Saudi intervention in Bahrain – a major hydrocarbon producer and home of the U.S. Navy’s Fifth Fleet – may not have ruffled too many feathers in Washington, D.C., continued Saudi support of the Saleh administration in Yemen increasingly jeopardizes the prospects of a negotiated and ordered transition, raising the specter of another Libya should the regime – a strategic partner in the ‘War on Terror’ collapse.

Finally, Rabi suggested that the instability caused by the downfall of Ben Ali and Mubarak are in line with the interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran and al-Qaeda: pro-

Western regimes are falling and public opinion in the Arab world is increasingly hostile toward the United States. This, Rabi suggests, together with the humiliating U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, and tensions with the Karzai government in Afghanistan over the conditions of withdrawal there, signals to Iran the slow erosion of American capacity and will to project in the region. Whether this will have an impact on Iran's relationship with and role in Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria is a question that remains unclear.

### **Conclusion**

“Democracy and Development in the Middle East After the Arab Spring” underscored the wide number of factors involved in the changes provoked by the Arab Spring. The discussions stressed the importance of time, place, structural, and strategic factors in explaining extant regime change (and future prospects for change) as well as democratic transition in the region. Varying domestic and international configurations explain the fall of Ben Ali, Mubarak, and Qaddhafi, as much as they explain the uncertainty of al-Khalifa in Bahrain, al-Assad in Syria, and Saleh in Yemen, and the apparent calm in Algeria, Iran, Jordan, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia. In sum, there appear to be multiple Arab Springs, characterized by the regime change of the early adapters and the indeterminacy and stasis of politics in regimes later hit by Arab Spring protests. For Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, the transition process remains in flux. Will their transitions result in democratization? The outcome in the transition of those states, moreover, will affect regional politics in both anticipated and unanticipated ways. Eight months since the fall of Ben Ali and Mubarak, the conference underscored, the very notion of the ‘Arab Spring’ remains in question.