



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“After the Uprisings: U.S. Policy in a Changing Middle East”

Project on Middle East Democracy

Dirksen Senate Office Building, Room 419

Thursday, February 10, 1:00pm – 2:30pm

On Thursday, the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) hosted a discussion on recent and ongoing events in Tunisia and Egypt and their influence on U.S. relations with the region’s governments and people and what steps the U.S. government can take to support democratic transitions in Egypt and Tunisia. POMED Executive Director **Stephen McInerney** made opening remarks and introduced panelists: **Larry Diamond**, Senior Fellow at Hoover Institution at Stanford University and founding co-editor of the Journal of Democracy; **Tom Malinowski**, Washington Director at Human Rights Watch; and **Mona Yacoubian**, Special Adviser at the Center for Conflict Analysis and Prevention, United States Institute of Peace.

Stephen McInerney opened by stating that for years many have been calling for reform in the Middle East, which has been largely ignored. The young and restive population which has now been mobilized calling for change and reforms which needs to be addressed. He pointed to Secretary of State **Hillary Clinton**’s speech in Doha in which she stated that the region’s foundations are sinking into the sands and that “those who cling to the status quo may be able to hold back the full impact of their countries’ problems for a little while, but not forever.” Nowhere is this clearer, McInerney stated, than in Egypt and Tunisia. He went on to say that there is a long road ahead as both countries move into a transition period. McInerney also alluded to rumors that Mubarak would be stepping down in the coming hours.

Tom Malinowski began by stating that Mubarak stepping down would satisfy one of the central demands of the people and that for the military establishment it seems that “the time has come to concede the dictator while saving the dictatorship.” **He cautioned that transitional military government will likely attempt to spread power amongst itself while slowing down the fundamental structural reforms which are necessary for true democracy to take a hold.** With the military, you will have the same players in power that will fight to the death to defend it

Malinowski also applauded President Obama’s approach to the situation as he has focused and clearly expressed the United States’ demands for reform instead of focusing on who the next leader is. **Amid the euphoria, it is important, Malinowski states, to stay focused on reforming the concrete legal structures.** The relative restraint shown by the Egyptian government and the military also shows the effective “all hands on deck approach” of the Obama administration. He states that whether it’s true or not, many Egypt perceive the U.S. to be a key player in how these protests unfold and our actions have a psychological effect on protesters’ moral.

He also stated that it is vitally important that the transition goes well. **If the transition occurs smoothly with the fundamental structural problems being addressed, Egypt and Tunisia will be a model for the rest of the Middle East and will positively affect the way foreign policy is conducted.** However, if it goes poorly, opposition groups around the world will be disheartened and it will be likely that U.S. foreign policy advisors will point to Egypt as an example of the futility of our efforts. He also noted that these protests have had a large impact on people all around the world by giving hope to suppressed opposition movements and scaring governments. He states however, that this may have negative consequences as authoritarian governments initiate crackdowns in hopes to stave off similar protests calling for change.

Larry Diamond began by noting the historical importance of these uprisings which have been sustained due to the enterprising efforts of the tech savvy youth who have encouraged all segments of society to rally behind their cause. **He also noted the lack of ideology in the protests thus far, which “gives lie to Mubarak’s rhetoric that democracy will lead to Islamists coming to power.”** Diamond pointed to a recent telephone poll conducted by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy which shows that only 15% of Egyptians support the Muslim Brotherhood. Despite inaccuracies of

polls, Diamond stated that the Muslim Brotherhood does not have majority support and is not a driving force behind these protests.

Diamond also echoed Malinowski's concerns that the structural corruption will continue as the military and elite attempt to maintain the status quo and continue to collect rents as they have in the past. He noted however, that there is a possibility that concessions may need to be made include amnesty for certain government and military officials. **He stated that "political transitions to democracy have many steps" and that he worries that Suleiman will try to subtly subvert the transitional process.** As such, he states, it is vital that the opposition unify and serve as a counterweight to Suleiman and his power structure that the international community employ constant vigilance to ensure backsliding does not occur and that human rights violations do not continue.

"The one thing Egypt needs to succeed is Freedom." You cannot suppress the climate of freedom, he says. The protesters have made clear that they will not accept "Mubarak Light" and neither should we. We need to push for reform and the opposition should form a coalition, pool their strategies and nominate a president. **He also stated that the country needs to move away from a presidential system to a parliamentary one, in which it is harder to manipulate power—as seen in Iraq—, and prevents the possibility of well organized groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and the NDP will win many of the seats.** He states that it also makes sure that it is not life or death for the old power players making them more likely to agree to transition.

On U.S. foreign policy, Diamond stated that we need to continue to support freedom publically and more forcefully in private. He argues that Obama's strong calls for freedom and restraint are evidenced by the army's actions and that his diplomatic efforts will be looked at favorably in history. He also states that in the future the United Nations will need to have on the ground monitoring of human rights.

Discussing Tunisia, Diamond states that events are still changing on the ground and nothing can be taken for granted. Although Egypt may fail or have a hybrid government, the success of Tunisia will have powerful diffusion impacts in the Arab World which is ripe and ready for change.

Mona Yacoubian stated that **"this is a watershed moment in the region from which there is no going back."** However, she states we need to be careful not to overstate the contagion effect. She stated that there are 6 characteristics which define the protests. First, she says, the uprisings were popular, organic grassroots movements that were homegrown which has led to its sustained momentum. Second, they broadly reflected society; here we were able to see the "fabled Arab street" make an appearance. Third, the uprisings were **not** driven by Islamists, but by the youth. Fourth, social media and technology played a significant role, but it is important not to overplay it. This was not a Twitter revolution. Fifth, the protests in Egypt and Tunisia were not bread riots. The people were demanding changes in governance, freedom, human rights, and protesting corruption; thus, they could not be bought off. Lastly, she states it is important to note the non-violent attitude of protesters; **this was not al-Qaeda and was not a call for jihad. Instead, what is more likely, she says, is that Al-Qaeda is feeling terrified right now; these mass protests are the most powerful antidote to groups like Al-Qaeda.**

Addressing the impact on the region as a whole, Yacoubian stated that a number of states including Algeria, Jordan, Yemen, Iraq and Syria, have implemented a number measures and have made concessions to its people in hopes of staving off similar protests. She states that while there are many common economic and political factors within the Arab world, each country differs. **The intangibles, such as the loss of fear, are critical, Yacoubian states. It is uncertain where the tipping point is or what will cause the people's anger to be more powerful than their fear, but it's vital.**

She also states that monarchies tend to be more insulated and protected from mass protests than republics though Jordan may prove to be the exception given its proximity to Israel and the large number of Palestinian refugees. Algeria and Yemen may see more precipitous change, she notes, however, given the crushing levels of poverty and the fractured nature of society she does not believe that Yemen will see the kind of uprisings we see in Tunisia and Egypt. She also noted that this is **not** the first time we have seen democratic revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa. Algeria experienced democratic change as did Lebanon which successfully kicked out the Syrian military from the country. However, these movements have faded from memory because they faltered. Here the U.S. needs to make sure to pay attention and prevent such reversals from occurring again.

She called on U.S. policy makers to leverage their influence with our European allies and work with them to support these movements and also to reach out to groups in the Middle East that want change including the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Action Front in Jordan.

Addressing a question on the role of the military, Malinowski stated that there will not be a substantial change in policy if power is transferred to the military and that their takeover of power will not constitute a coup as military officials had growing roles in the government. However, if they assume power, the Egyptian military will need to be responsible for what the state does, including torture and reform; it can no longer blame the government for certain policies and actions, as it will have large implications for what U.S. relations and policy will be. Yacoubian stated that whether the term coup can be applied will be dependent on what they do as the military establishment has been just as vested and entrenched in the status quo as Mubarak was. Moving forward, she states that it will be essential for the U.S. to leverage its military to military relationship and our aid package to ensure reform takes place. Diamond notes that the U.S. does not have the close personal ties to Egyptian military leaders, like we have had with previous military leaders who have heralded in democratic transition in the past. “The military is a black box, an opaque institution.” Additionally, the military suffers from generational cleavages due to the fact that the military leaders have benefitted from rents, themselves instead of spreading the wealth. He believes that these cleavages may have also prevented the military leadership from issuing orders to initiate a crackdown as they doubted the loyalty of their troops. Diamond also stated that we need to make sure that whoever takes control, immediately, will only be in power until presidential elections take place.

In response to a question on how to unite opposition groups, Diamond stated that the opposition of the streets and the “council of wise men” need to merge and elect a leadership committee of 3-4 leaders which will engage in negotiations. He states that potential members may include **Wael Ghonim**, the recently released Google executive and “We are all Khaled Said” Facebook page, **Mohamed ElBaradei**, and members of the Muslim Brotherhood. While such a mass mobilization cannot be sustained in the long run, these opposition groups can threaten to organize one again, if the government fails to comply. It is important, Diamond states, that the regime does not have the ability to choose which opposition groups to work with as Suleiman and Mubarak are “experts at the divide and conquer.” McInerney also notes that now is the time for these groups to merge as the main demand of the protesters—Mubarak stepping down—is being addressed.

Responding to a question on what Congress can do to help, Malinowski stated, “Do not listen to the Livingston Group,” alluding to a lobbyist group which advocates on behalf of the Egyptian government. Additionally, he states they need to watch what happens and leverage their aid. It is helpful for the administration, he says, for Congress to say their relationship is dependent on what the government does as we can then employ the “good-cop, bad-cop strategy.” Yacoubian, on the other hand, states that it is helpful for Congress to work with the administration and “put politics aside” to ensure the opportunity is not lost and the ball continues moving forward. She also cautions against “fear mongering associated with Islamists.” Diamond states that we need more far reaching rules against conflict of interests and states that rules should be drafted which prevent former members of Congress and high ranking government officials from lobbying on behalf of foreign governments for 10 years following the completion of their post.

When asked why Tunisia and Egypt have succeeded where Iran did not, the panelists cautioned against overstating the importance of social media. It is a tool that allowed activists a place to organize and take the initial steps. The panelists also noted that there was not a breakdown of fear in Iran the same way there was in Egypt as the Iranian government was not afraid to use violence against their citizens. Diamond also pointed out that regime change was very close to occurring in Iran, but the opposition lacked adequate leadership and organization.

Addressing a question by former POMED Executive Director **Andrew Albertson** on how U.S. diplomacy can change to support gradual reform in the region, Malinowski stated that Obama needs to realize the strong impact his words can really have on the people and these governments. He also calls on the U.S. to use more pressure on governments to address corruption. Diamond stated that for too long there has been too much of a focus on the Middle East Peace Process and maintaining stability instead of reform, however, he states that he no longer believes in gradual reform and calls for expeditious and genuine change. Yacoubian states that the Egyptian uprisings are a watershed moment for the foreign policy apparatus because of the way it took everyone by surprise and also because of its dynamism. She also states that we need to look at how much our old policies really helped or did not help and that the U.S. needs to take adopt a long term vision when addressing issues in the Middle East.