“Implications of the Arab Uprisings”

On March 29-30, 2012, the Council on Foreign Relations and St. Antony’s College, University of Oxford held a symposium on the implications of the Arab uprisings at CFR’s New York headquarters. The entire set of events was made possible by the generous support of the Hauser Foundation.

The Arab Uprisings: How Did We Get There?

Margaret MacMillan, warden of St. Antony’s College, University of Oxford opened the program on March 29, with an early evening conversation with CFR president Richard Haass. Dr. MacMillan commented on the historical forces driving the current wave of popular uprisings sweeping the Middle East. She noted that neither nationalism nor border disputes are driving events in the region; at the root of the uprisings is a desire by individuals for freedom, dignity, and broader opportunities. The people of the Middle East are dictating, for the first time, what they want.

Drawing on her historical research on the establishment of the post-World War I order in the Middle East, MacMillan lent credence to the perception of “victimhood” within the area, arguing that the interference of outside powers in the region has been real. The Europeans, she said, demonstrated great arrogance in thinking they could draw up the borders of the region as they saw fit. Moreover, Britain, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union operated entirely out of their own interests in the Middle East. She said that to entirely blame outside powers for the roots of what is going on today, however, is to deny the people of the Middle East “agency.”

Though there is a great cause for hope right now, MacMillan asserted, the trouble with revolutions is that they are unpredictable. She suggested that it is important to remember that democratization takes a long time. Local forces are crucial in government formation. The West, she suggested, should offer help, but also accept being turned down if regional partners don’t want such assistance.

Prospects for Democracy

Michael Willis, director of the St. Antony’s College Middle East Center and King Mohamed VI fellow in Moroccan and Mediterranean studies at Oxford University, opened the session on prospects for
democracy by suggesting that there was now a new actor on the political scene in the Middle East: large numbers of citizens on the streets demanding change. This broadening out of political participation, he asserted, is a fundamental component of democracy, though it does not inevitably bring about democracy. Elliott Abrams, CFR senior fellow for Middle East Studies, echoed this sentiment, saying that what has been triumphant throughout the Arab uprisings was majority rule. He posited that the regimes that have fallen were overthrown because they “had no coherent defense of their rule to make.” Monarchies are doing better since they enjoy a greater degree of legitimacy than republican regimes.

Both panelists agreed that it was far too early in the process to make predictions about the kinds of government that would emerge in the Arab world. Willis commented that the fact that there have been discussions in countries like Egypt about putting in mechanisms for protecting minorities is hopeful. On the timing of the Arab uprisings, Abrams noted that during the Cold War, there were alternative theories of government. However, as the Soviet Union crumbled, democracy emerged as the only legitimate form all over the world. Over time, Arabs began questioning their own systems of government and feeling their own freedom deficit. This, coupled with the Bush administration’s ideological offensive against nondemocratic forms of government, led to a steady erosion of legitimacy of Arab regimes. Willis added that “when you talk to people on the ground, you find they are the same as everybody else. Arabs want to have a say in how they are governed.”

 Asked about the role of technology and social media, the panelists agreed that despite all the discussion on the matter, new technologies played only a minimal role in the uprisings. Social media, Willis posited, helps people feel they are not alone and speeds up communication. But, he added, there “are no bullets on Facebook.” Thus, the true driving force behind the uprisings was and is the protesters in the streets.

The panel concluded with a discussion on regional economics. Abrams stated that the economics of the uprisings were a great worry, in general. Tunisia, given its small size, is less of a concern than Egypt, which has severe economic needs. Abrams cautioned that economic collapse is often a precursor to political collapse. Willis added that reorganizing an economy and dealing with corruption requires a huge amount of time. Abrams concluded by pointing out that all the good economic policymakers under the Mubarak regime were now refugees. Where would the new policymakers come from?

Monarchies

Eugene Rogan, faculty fellow and university lecturer in the modern history of the Middle East at St. Antony’s College, opened the panel on monarchies by suggesting that the priority for the existing monarchies across the Middle East was to put a firewall between them and the revolutionary pressures sweeping the region. He cautioned that though many of the wealthy monarchies had so far been able to spend money to stave off these pressures, it would only be possible to buy stability for a certain amount of time. Such a strategy, however, would not last: “For how long will the citizens in
Saudi be okay with Egyptians having far more political freedoms?" No one in the region will be immune, he suggested.

In a discussion about the other monarchies in the region, Rogan pointed out that Morocco had adopted an entirely different approach than the Gulf monarchies. Rogan suggested that it was the monarchy that had adapted to revolutionary pressures there. Rogan argued that Jordanian rule was legitimate and its rulers understood the revolutionary pressures better than we realize. He added that Saudi Arabia and the GCC are intent on preventing the collapse of Jordan’s regime, as it is an important pillar of regional stability. The invitations extended to Jordan and Morocco to join the GCC represent the organization’s attempts to stave off any reform efforts or moves toward constitutionalism.

Mohammad Bazzi, adjunct CFR senior fellow for Middle Eastern Studies, suggested that Bahrain’s experience had poisoned possibilities in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia, leader of the GCC, promulgated the notion that the uprising in Bahrain had been due to Iranian influence. This effort to dismiss the uprising of a large portion of the population has broader consequences for Shiite populations throughout the Gulf, he said. Bazzi continued by emphasizing the deep sectarian divides in the region, noting that despite the fact that the Assad regime exacerbates sectarian tensions in Syria, it is still real and an important worry.

Rogan noted that the Gulf states had lost faith in U.S. abilities to maintain order and stability in the region after Obama broke with Egyptian president Mubarak last year. As a result, Saudi Arabia has assumed greater responsibilities in the region, as have Iran and Turkey which have are also emerging as important actors. The U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia was damaged by the Obama administration’s handling of Egypt, although Rogan assessed that it has made it past the crisis point, which is encouraging for the United States.

Islam and Politics

Isobel Coleman, CFR senior fellow and director of the Civil Society, Markets, and Democracy Initiative, opened the panel on Islam and politics by commenting on women’s role in the uprisings. She asserted that there has been large scale mobilization of women across the region driven by numerous factors, including the opening up of media and advances in women’s education. St. Antony’s Michael Willis pointed out that the role of Islamist women will be central going forward, a factor currently overlooked. There is a common view that Islamist women will do as Islamist men direct them and this is false. Ed Husain, CFR senior fellow for Middle Eastern Studies, added that currently the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, by not allowing women to be members and patronizing them as wives and daughters, is signaling that it has higher priorities than women’s rights.

Concerning the issue of minority rights, Husain asserted that most Islamist organizations are stuck in the mindset that elections mean majority rule. Democratic culture, rule of law, governmental transparency, and sovereignty still trip up Islamists. The debate on these issues and human rights is currently in flux, he added. Coleman echoed this, saying that the full spectrum of political parties is
debating minority and women’s rights across the region. Women are looking across the region to see what is working in other countries and debating various approaches to securing rights.

The panelists also addressed the West’s role in the uprisings. Coleman outlined a number of ways the West could involve itself in the region and concluded that using brute force and giving large amounts of money in overt ways would be the least useful approaches. Instead, she advocated that the West offer a platform through awards and invitations to government meetings. She concluded, however, that no one but those from the region knows better what would be helpful. Willis offered that the West should involve itself subtly, humbly, and by offering technical assistance. He discouraged making references to values as values are linked to specific civilizations and instead suggested the West offer up possible technical assistance for democratic rule. Husain pointed out that the youth in the region have repeatedly called for Western involvement. Those rising up across the region were not mobilized by China or even by France. He concluded by saying eastern and western values are not necessarily at odds. Were the United States to acknowledge the debt it has to Islamic civilization, Muslim hearts and minds would be more open to receiving U.S. ideas.

The panel concluded with a discussion on the economy. Coleman pointed out that while people certainly wanted freedom and social justice, they also wanted jobs. The al-Nahda party in Tunisia will be judged on how it delivers on the economic situation but it realizes this and has begun focusing on the economy. Willis added that often people were voting for Islamists out of the perception that they were the only ones not being corrupt.

Regional Consequences—The Geopolitics of the Changing Middle East

Steven Cook, CFR Hasib J. Sabbagh senior fellow for Middle Eastern Studies, began the session by identifying three dominant political trends in the region: the rise of Islamist movements, the rise of Turkey as a regional player, and the peripheral role of outside players such as the United States. Avi Shlaim, emeritus fellow, St. Antony’s College, commented on Israel’s reaction to the Arab uprisings, which he identified as negative on all levels. He asserted that Israel had ignored all opportunities to become part of the region, identifying instead as part of the West, and at the same time exaggerated all of the dangers.

Marwa Daoudy, visiting lecturer in international affairs and visiting research scholar at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, currently on leave as fellow at St. Antony’s College, asserted that there was a need for a paradigm shift toward the Middle East. The perception that the Arab world is stagnant is mistaken, as the international community is witnessing bottom-up change in the region. Cook agreed, adding that public opinion will be the new driver of foreign policy and that this will make it more challenging for the United States and Israel to act as they have in the past. Shlaim asserted that this would also make resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict more challenging, given that the Arab street has always been hostile to Israel and peace is easier to make between dictators.
The panelists disagreed about whether the region was more or less stable given the recent uprisings. Daoudy claimed that the perception that the region was stable before the uprisings was a false one. Shlaim contended that there was greater instability now as only rulers take the chance to make peace. Cook asserted that there would be greater instability in the short run due to all of the transformational changes. Were Egypt successful at building a legitimate system of government, he went on, it could become a more appropriate interlocutor in the region for the United States and Israel. Daoudy disagreed, saying that were majority rule established in Egypt, agreements like Camp David could be revisited and possibly harmed.

On the issue of foreign involvement, Cook offered his sense that the Arab street was looking for the world powers to stay out. Tahrir Square, he said, was a moment of national empowerment in Egypt. Shlaim agreed that the resentment of foreign intervention in the region is real especially as the United States has been an unfit imperial power and its record of involvement in the Middle East has been roundly a disaster.

**Policy Responses for the United States and Europe**

Robert Danin, CFR’s Eni Enrico Mattei senior fellow for the Middle East and North Africa, characterized the U.S. response to the Arab uprisings as reactive, acknowledging that what was both unnerving and exciting right now was that nothing in the region was preordained. St. Antony's Eugene Rogan claimed that Europe’s response was similar to the U.S. response. Europe struggled on all fronts with the clash between values and interests and how to handle the evolving status quo.

The panelists debated attempts to bring together policy and rhetoric with Rogan asserting that part of what informed the decision to intervene in Libya was the notion that there would be some pay off for those who intervened from Libya’s oil reserves. Danin pointed out that an overriding concern for European nations with regards to Libya was refugees and immigration. He noted that the United States’ breaking with Mubarak had precipitated a huge backlash in the Gulf, and constricted the Obama administration’s responses when Saudi Arabia invaded Bahrain in March 2011. As a point going forward, Danin noted that we should delineate specific redlines to our allies as a measure of outlining our support and the limits therein.

The panel concluded with a discussion of how Western policies should be shaped in the future. Rogan encouraged Europe to use its soft power capabilities. Aiding in a new age of freedom without being forceful, he added, is a way of engendering good will. Danin highlighted that democracy assistance often received a bad reputation, being perceived as something the West promoted more among its enemies than its friends in the region. Democracy should no longer be a dirty word. Danin also asserted that while it has to be indigenous, the United States can support democracy’s cultivation among U.S. allies and friends. Finally, he advocated that the United States and Europe work in partnership and through regional institutions to address the Middle East’s challenging economic conditions. Rogan rejected that, arguing that Europe was not in any economic position to offer financial support.