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“Egypt at the Tipping Point?”

The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center, 1300 Pennsylvania Ave.

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On Friday, **David Ottaway** gave a talk at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars entitled “Egypt at the Tipping Point?” Ottaway – who is a senior scholar at the Wilson Center and the former Bureau Chief for the *Washington Post* in Cairo – discussed the findings from his recent [paper](#), published in the Wilson Center Middle East Program’s Summer 2010 Occasional Paper Series. The talk was introduced and moderated by **Haleh Esfandiari**, the director of the Wilson Center’s Middle East Program.

Ottaway opened by explaining that this paper is part of a broader book project in which he plans to revisit various countries in the Middle East and Africa in which he had worked as a journalist over the past several decades. He said that he had witnessed some remarkable political events (including the assassination of **Anwar Sadat** in 1981), and is now conducting a “then and now” comparison of each country’s domestic social, political, and economic situation. **In short, he plans to use his previous experiences in those states as a baseline to judge what has changed and what has not.** In the case of Egypt, Ottaway asserted that the comparison was especially interesting: he was there to witness **Hosni Mubarak**’s assumption of power following Sadat’s death, and is now witnessing the end of Mubarak’s political career.

Ottaway outlined a series of questions that he sought to answer in his paper. They included:

- Who will be Mubarak’s successor, and what will that transition look like?
- Is the nature of the Egyptian regime changing?
- What would it mean for Egypt if **Mohamed ElBaradei** became president?
- What has changed in terms of human rights, the economy, and social and political trends in Egypt over the last few decades?
- Is Egypt ripe for a “color revolution,” similar to the ones in Iran and Eastern Europe?
- In what ways might Turkey be a model for Egypt? In particular, might the AKP’s role in Turkish politics illuminate anything about the future of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egyptian politics?

Ottaway then discussed several findings. First, he commented on the remarkable willingness of Egyptians to endure highly difficult social and economic conditions. He described the widespread poverty in Egypt and the persistently low minimum wage provided to workers, asking “How do people put up with this?” **Interestingly, instead of “throwing stones,” Egyptians make jokes about their situation.**

He also contended that **Egypt is not on the brink of a revolution.** This may be, in part, because “the government has installed just enough safety valves to keep the pot from exploding.” He explained that

journalists are given *just* enough media freedom, workers are given *just* high enough wages, and the Muslim Brotherhood is allowed *just* enough influence in domestic affairs to keep Egyptians satisfied.

Ottaway elaborated on the state of the Muslim Brotherhood, as well. He touched on the internal debate among Egypt's sitting political establishment over whether welcoming the Brotherhood into the political system would ultimately help or hurt the interests of powerful state elites. Either way, Ottaway said, **the government continues to exert tight control over the group**, and Brotherhood leaders have told Ottaway that they only expect to win five or ten seats in the upcoming parliamentary elections. He said that the Brotherhood is "at an impasse," and that they are currently engaged in a debate about their role in Egyptian society and politics.

Next, Ottaway discussed the opening media sphere in Egypt. Although there are "still red lines" that journalists may not cross, he noted that there are currently 26 private newspapers operating in the country. According to Ottaway, this demonstrates **that the government allows a level of debate that was not previously tolerated**, and journalists are broadly appreciative of the new openness.

Ottaway also acknowledged social disparities in the country, noting that the wealthy tier of Egyptian society is growing but that **the gap between the rich and the poor has also deepened considerably**. Overall, though, he asserted that the economy is "taking off," and that there is a sense of dynamism in the Egyptian economy.

Regarding Egypt's political future, Ottaway pointed out that **Gamal Mubarak** is not the military's candidate, but rather the National Democratic Party's candidate. Ottaway said that this reflects an important shift in Egyptian politics, and suggested that the "tipping point" (in the title of his paper) could refer to a shift from military to civilian rule in Egyptian politics. Regarding Mohamed ElBaradei, Ottaway observed that he has considerable international prestige; on the other hand, however, **his elite status may make it difficult for him to achieve much traction among average Egyptian voters**. Moreover, he is a different type of opposition leader than the Mubaraks are accustomed to, and Ottaway predicted that **"he might cause the Mubaraks real trouble."** Ottaway took great interest in ElBaradei's public statements in recent months, in which he has called for an election boycott, peaceful protests, and even civil disobedience. **Ottaway concluded that "ElBaradei could well be a game-changer," and noted that "how the Mubaraks deal with this guy is their dilemma."**

In the question-and-answer session, one audience member asked about the role of NGOs in the political and social sphere in Egypt. Ottaway responded that although there is considerable NGO activity in the country, it is largely taking place in cyber space – he said that to make a real impact, NGOs must connect more closely with people on the streets. In response to a question about the role of the Obama administration, **Ottaway said that he thinks it is unlikely that the administration will place substantial pressure on the Mubarak regime to make democratic reforms at this time**. He added, however, that the Obama administration will obviously have to take some form of action if the political situation heats up dramatically. On the economy, Ottaway asserted that Egypt demonstrates the failure of trickle-down economic theory: although there is a growing class of wealthy oligarchs in the country, that wealth has not permeated society more broadly. As a result, a large segment of the population continues to live in poverty.