



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“From Tunisia to Egypt: Protests in the Arab World”
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington DC
Monday, January 31, 8:30am – 10am

On Monday, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace hosted a discussion of the developments in Egypt and their implications of the Arab world, where protests began in Tunisia and have spread to Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, and Algeria. **Marwan Muasher**, Vice President for Studies at the Carnegie Endowment, moderated the event and introduced the other panelists: **Amr Hamzawy**, Research Director and Senior Associate of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut who joined the panelists from Midan Tahrir in Cairo, **Michele Dunne**, Senior Associate in the Middle East Program at Carnegie Endowment, and **Marina Ottaway**, Director of the Middle East Program at Carnegie Endowment.

Michele Dunne began by stating that the next 24 to 48 hours will be a watershed moment, one way or another, given the large demonstrations planned for tomorrow (February 1st). **She stated that the United States is in a difficult position no matter which way the events go: on the one hand there is a transition which will hold risks for Egypt and U.S. interests, but on the other hand, there may be a “very forceful crackdown”.** Either of these paths, she says, will be difficult to navigate. Additionally, she stated, there is this question of whether the regime, either Mubarak or Omar Suleiman’s regime, will be willing to negotiate a transition. Thus far, they seem to be doing the minimum and are imposing “reforms” instead of making it an inclusive process.

Dunne also notes the fact that the opposition is not unified and the large question of whether Mohamed ElBaradei can become the focal point of the opposition, especially given the fact that these protests were very much a grassroots protest. Dunne also questions “to what extent is it necessary for the formal political opposition to be involved in a national unity government or in negotiating with Mubarak government?”

Finally, she states, **“what we have seen in this uprising in Egypt is an utter failure of the agenda of kind of top-down reform in the region.” The U.S. has failed to push it effectively and governments like Egypt have failed to implement it effectively leading to bottom-up change instead of top down reform.** She closed by stating that she hopes that we “learn some lessons from that about being a little bit more serious about engaging with governments in the region about reforms that are really meaningful and not cosmetic because, you know, we see now that there is a price to pay.”

Amr Hamzawy, speaking from Midan Tahrir in Cairo, stated, **“I have never seen such a commitment by Egyptians coming from all different walks of life and from different backgrounds to change: to changing the government.”** He went on to say that the two big questions facing the nation are: have the opposition groups unified? And secondly, has the regime made up its mind in terms of responding positively to the protesters’ demands? In regards to the first, Amr says no; the opposition continues to be in a state of contestation and forming parallel movements; this he says limits the legitimacy of the protesters. Many, he also states, are frustrated with ElBaradei’s attempts to put him-self forward. In his opinion however, “we are in a moment of transition and the street, to my mind, will push in the direction of unity among the opposition. Agreement is going to take a few days.

In regards to the second question, Amr says, **the response of the regime so far has been extremely slow and extremely disappointing.** The formation of the cabinet was announced to the great disappointment of everyone as it ruled out any positions of representation which means the government will continue to go on and ignore demands of their people: amending the constitution, dissolving the parliament and the shura council, create a national unity government and constitutional assembly, organize presidential and parliamentary elections in six months.

When asked by **Marwan Muasher** what are the chances that Mubarak will stay in power, Hamzawy stated that no matter what happens change has come to Egypt: “This is not the country which we had before last Tuesday, and definitely before last Friday, and [the regime] will have to realize it.” It is time he says, for the regime to make up their mind—this is not a question of weeks, it’s a question of days—and **the ministerial establishment needs to make a safe and secure transition to democracy a la Tunisia, or with their own model.** The regime must open up and the humanitarian establishment and peacemakers must help move Egypt into transition. This he said also avoids the complexities associated with the military establishment, which is very closely linked to and highly regards Mubarak, undertaking the transition.

In response to a question as to whether they would accept Omar Suleiman to head the transition, Hamzawy stated that although he is not popular, he is accepted and well respected member of the military establishment, which is a national establishment which is committed to the nation. In addition, **Suleiman helping lead the transition would be giving the demonstrating society a safe transition.** You are offering them a safe way out that differs from the Ben Ali model.

The U.S., Hamzawy states, needs to continue to make strong remarks pushing for elections and change, like those [made](#) by Clinton on Sunday, January 30th. Their approach needs to differ from that of Tunisia, they should not wait and see because the protests continue to move at a very fast pace. In response to a question, he stated that he does not think that the movement will turn anti-American or Islamist. The people are mostly concerned about the local and domestic issues.

Muasher followed Dunne’s lead and looked to see what lessons other Arab countries can learn. First, he said they must understand that the economic concerns are not the people’s only concerns: “there are more structure and underlying themes, primarily that of governance.” Thus, you cannot address crises through economic means. While each country does differ in the Arab world, **“a common thread that joins the region together,” Muasher says, “is that of governance. This is an issue that I hope other Arab countries will take not of and start addressing.”**

Secondly, Muasher argues, the “bread before freedom” argument did not work. What it has done, essentially, is economic liberalization without the system of check and balances, which in the Arab world, and has increased corruption. **Unless economic liberalization and political reform are done together, he says, I don’t think the Arab world, will see a bright future.** We need more political reform, he says.

Third, he states, you cannot, in today’s age, afford to ignore the Islamists, who are a major political force, especially if they are pursuing their means through peaceful means. In places like Egypt, forming a national unity government without the Islamists will lead to lack of legitimacy and make political reform look less credible; thus we cannot allow systems to be closed on the basis of keeping Islamists out.

Fourth, Arab leaders, can no longer use the argument that they need to undertake reform at a very slow pace. The argument, Muasher says, has lost all credibility. Additionally he states, the U.S. has for decades either ignored reform or tried to impose it from the outside in a way that did not take the region’s circumstances into consideration. They need to change. **While it may be too late in Egypt, the U.S. needs to help other countries by insisting on a credible reform process and supporting that process rather than supporting “ad hoc programs that don’t end to any power sharing and any sort of system of checks and balances.”**

Marina Ottaway began by stating that Arab leadership can no longer be complacent about the passivity of the people; the protests show that desperation and frustration can translate into mobilization and the tearing down of a regime.

The question, Ottaway states, is who can take leadership of these movements: **“You can have a bottom-up revolt, but in the end, reform always comes from the top...Reform cannot come from the street.”** This lack of effective leadership is what plagues Egypt and Tunisia and it leads one to question how much change is really going to be brought about. Six weeks have passed since the uprising began in Tunisia and not a single possible leader has emerged. In Egypt, she says, the case is easier; people are rallying behind ElBaradei because there is no better alternative. However, ElBaradei is not a great candidate either, she notes, given the fact that his attitude and absence has disappointed many including his supporters.

In Egypt, there are three different strands of the protest movement, Ottaway explains. The first is the liberal middle-class youth movement, which mobilized the masses through social media and who have refused the kind of formal

organization championed by traditional opposition groups. Their lack of structure and organization has forced to hand over leadership to someone else especially since their youth denies them the credibility to negotiate with Mubarak and the military. The second component is the labor movement which, in the past, has focused exclusively on economic grievances. They have made an attempt to not turn the economic grievances into political ones because “they knew the moment they started pushing for political demands, they would get crushed,” whereas the regime was willing to negotiate economic concessions. The third strand is the Muslim Brotherhood, which seems to be getting weaker in recent years after government crackdowns led to internal dissention.

In a study completed by Ottaway and Hamzawy on protest movements in the Arab World, they concluded that **“not much was going to happen in Egypt until the three movements came together, and if the three movements ever converged, then the government would be in serious trouble.”** Ottaway believes that the current protests have allowed the groups the opportunity to come together.

Responding to a question about Mubarak’s future, Muasher responded by saying, “if you judge from history, I think, I think the Mubarak regime is finished.” Whether he leaves now or in 6 months is beside the point; now is the time for transition. Muasher states that there is little the U.S. can do at this point, **“You don’t build credibility in one day.” And while Mubarak may have been a reliable ally in the past, it is irrelevant now that he has lost credibility among his people.** It makes no sense, even in political terms, to continue to support the ally...You can support the transitional process.” Muasher calls on the U.S. to take heed and not repeat the same mistake when dealing with other Arab countries, “or else we might be faced with vacuum.” What the U.S. needs to do is push countries to produce a credible reform process and caution them that if they don’t, they will face uprisings.

Ottaway agrees with Muasher stating, “The United States is largely a spectator at this point.” The question for the U.S. now is how it preserves its long-term relationship with the country and whoever will be running the government. To do this, the U.S. needs to “come off the fence” or call for a government of national unity and beginning the process of negotiations.

Addressing a question about the role of the military, Ottaway says it will play a pivotal role in reestablishing order in the country. But the question is which party of the military will take over and who in the military will take over. So far, she states, the military has been backing Mubarak and they cannot reestablish control unless they stop backing him, as it is unlikely protests will stop till Mubarak leaves. The only other way the army can impose order is a Tiananmen Square.

Addressing a question about the Muslim Brotherhood, Ottaway stated that while they are better organized than the other parties, they do not have the support of the majority of the population. The best way to decrease their chance of coming out strongly is to open up the formation of political parties; this, she says, was one of the real mistakes of the Mubarak regime.

Ottaway addressed a question on the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, stating, “I doubt very much that the foreign policy of Egypt is going to change in the near future,” especially given the domestic issues facing the country. Muasher agrees with Ottaway saying that any government emerging out of Egypt will be less warm to Israel, but abrogating the peace treaty is not something anyone is looking at in Egypt, “I do not expect that will happen at all.” This movement, Muasher states, is not about Israel. **“This is about corruption. This is about governments... Arab publics would like the U.S. to look at it from that angle rather than from the angle of U.S.-Israel relationships every single time...look at it as it is: a movement about governance and about corruption.”**

Responding to a question on the role of democracy assistance programs, Muasher stated that these programs do very little to help promote actual power sharing and a system of checks and balances. He states that U.S. and Arab governments are playing a game with these programs. Until there is sufficient political will among Arab countries to open up the system in a serious manner that would result in power sharing with strong parliaments, independent judiciary, and freedom of press, these programs are not very useful. We need to **“focus more on the political discussions that are going on between the U.S. and countries of the region rather than give the illusion that by giving such money, the U.S. is helping the cause of democracy in the region.”** Ottaway reiterated Muasher’s sentiments adding, it’s the small NGOs that are more suitable to put pressure on the government in democratic systems than to bring change in an undemocratic system.