



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“Tunisia: Protests and Prospects for Change”

**The George Washington University Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) and the Institute for Middle East Studies
1957 E Street NW, Washington DC
January 25, 2011, 12:00pm- 1:30pm**

On Tuesday, the Project on Middle East Political Science and the Institute for Middle East Studies at The George Washington University hosted an event focused on reactions to the popular uprising in Tunisia entitled, “Tunisia: Protests and Prospects for Change.” **Marc Lynch**, associate professor of political science and international affairs at The George Washington University, and director of the Institute for Middle East Studies moderated the event. He is also a non-resident senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security. The two other speakers were **Christopher Alexander**, Associate Professor of Political Science and Associate Dean for International Programs at Davidson College and **John P. Entelis**, Professor of Political Science and Director of the Middle East Studies Program at Fordham University.

To begin **Marc Lynch** set the tone of the discussion posing the question, **are we looking at a period of true dramatic change in the region or just a one-off opportunity?** **Chris Alexander** addressed the origins of the protests asserting **that the political and socio-economic grievances were definite and this coupled with social media served as the “catalyst” for change.** Alexander commented on the recent arguments about naming the revolt and claimed that it was not a revolution or a coup, but a **“disorganized collection” of broad protest waves with political and military elements that helped push out a dictator.**

Alexander stated that the recent signs of giving amnesty to Islamist and activists have been a relatively surprising development that he supports, but he cautions against the notion that Tunisians would like to see all former RCD members purged from the interim government. **This would be detrimental he believes because there are not many beyond these individuals who at the moment can run the country effectively.** Alexander did propose the idea **that the interior ministry could potentially be dissolved in an attempt to appease protesters because it was the most “noxious” of the ministries in day to day life of Tunisians under Ben Ali.** Alexander proposed the possibility of a potential deal that could be brokered which could include the formation of an interim council and cabinet member changes to quell unrest.

Alexander outlined two risks of the upcoming elections: **1) that a revamped version of the RCD will find itself back in power in an unchecked way through a pseudo-democratic process, which could lead to authoritarianism and 2) that if a bi-polar election is set up between the RCD and the Islamists this will not be beneficial to true democratic change.** Thus Alexander believes **that party building and institutional reform are necessary**, because he believes that **the electoral code and constitution must be changed now so that they are not used as a “weapon.”**

The RCD party is so pervasive in Tunisian life that Alexander believes **that opposition coalitions must be formed for early elections** in order to prevent the risks he stated earlier. In closing Alexander

addressed the needs for reform within the political culture in Tunisia due to the undemocratic nature of party structures even within the opposition movements. He believes that **Tunisian political parties truly need to build a sense of what it means to be a “real party.”**

John Entelis labeled Tunisia’s unrest as, “**Tunisia’s Intifada,**” due to the spontaneous riots and protests similar to what happened in Palestine. Entelis believed that in the case of Tunisia the “**question was never if but when**” political unrest and change would occur. He attributed this **to the very advanced middle-class society**. Entelis questioned **how Tunisian’s seemed to tolerate an authoritarian leader for so long**. Entelis discussed the role of the military in the uprising, arguing **that they have served more as defenders of the political reform, which is a distinction between Tunisia’s military and many of its Arab neighbors**.

Entelis believes that the US role has been viewed in many ways as an obstacle to helping people gain rights to a free political process, but that he sees changes including a sense that, “**we (the US Government) have the ability to take an enlightened stance on Tunisia,**” in an attempt to be on the right side of history. Entelis also believes that this could clearly be sending a message that, “**maybe the moment has come to end the status quo,**” in the region.

In regards to political Islam in Tunisia, Entelis believes that **the Ennahda movement is quite unique in its willingness to participate non-violently**. He also believes that the **Ennahda movement is genuinely Tunisian and unique due to its legitimate political message and organization**. He believes that Ennahda will play a critical role in the democratic transition of Tunisia and “**if it succeeds it could serve as a political template for democracy that the Arab world has been demanding.**”

Lynch warned of the strong temptation of the media to move on to the next big story although there remain many "ifs" in Tunisia and the region that have yet to be fully fleshed out. Lynch also cautioned against the numerous claims that have come out that this will lead to revolution across the region because regimes will adapt in how they deal with protests and unrest. Lynch stated, “**The last decade has been one of the most turbulent decades in terms of protests in the Middle East, this is not new, the contagion argument rests on historical amnesia.**” However, Lynch believes that the involvement of Islamists in the political process could send a powerful message to the Arab World.

A question was asked about the character of the trade unions in Tunisia and what kind of effect they will have in the political landscape. Alexander responded arguing that **there is real potential for trade unions to become very political**. He asserted **that the UGTT has transformed into a powerful voice, most notably the educational unions which have a long history in politics**. When asked who makes up Ennahda and what their relationship is with labor, Entelis responded by **arguing that they are a class cutting movement made up of multiple facets of society including the educated, urban, blue collar, and others**. He believes **their power lies in the truly populist character they possess**. Alexander believes that **there is a real history of ties to labor, but cautions that the situation has drastically changed due to the opening of political freedoms, so it remains questionable what type of relationship they will have**.