



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“Unrest in the Middle East: Scenes from the Revolution”

The Brookings Institution

1775 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington DC

Monday, March 7, 10:00am – 11:30am

On Monday, the Brookings Institution hosted a discussion on the democratic uprisings taking place across the Middle East and the broader implications for the U.S. and the wider region. **Kenneth Pollack**, Senior Fellow and Director of the Saban Center made opening remarks and moderated the event which included insights from the following speakers: **Salman Shaikh**, Fellow and Director of the Brookings Doha Center; **Shadi Hamid**, Fellow and Director of Research at the Brookings Doha Center; **Daniel Byman**, Senior Fellow and Director of Research at the Saban Center; and **Shibley Telhami**, the Anwar Sadat Professor of Peace and Development at the University of Maryland and non-resident Senior Fellow at Brookings.

Kenneth Pollack opened by stating that the countries in the Middle East and North Africa, which have experienced uprisings, share many commonalities such as social, political, and economic stagnation which has led to the anger and frustration of their people. However, he noted that popular protests have manifested differently in each country as the frustrations have tapped into ethnic, sectarian, geographical, and tribal cleavages. **He stated that it is important for policy makers to note the commonalities while also understanding the nuances in the differences and as such asked panelists to respond to questions on a country by country basis.**

Shadi Hamid began by discussing the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt stating that at the beginning of the protests, the group played a very small role, but gradually increased its presence as the protests grew. He stated that the group was smart as they protected protesters in Tahrir and provided them with services while being careful to avoid using Islamic slogans and symbols. At the same time, they wrote op-eds which were then published in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* thereby increasing their visibility while avoiding the negative connotations usually associated with the group. Additionally, given their importance on the Egyptian political scene, the military has been forced to meet with the group and is seemingly responding to its thoughts. One symbol of the growing influence of the party is the presence of the leaders during the swearing in of the new Prime Minister **Essam Sharaf**. He stated that **the liberal leaders are concerned about the influence of the Brotherhood and that early parliamentary elections will lead to landslide victory for the group** as other groups will not have the necessary time to organize and will there by hinder the development of a competitive political environment. **Shibley Telhami** noted that **while the Brotherhood remains influential, there is a generational divide within the group** as their young activists remain critical of the leadership's relations with the military leadership.

Telhami also stated that **the protests have transformed the environment psychologically in ways that were not expected and believes that the “great Arab awakening is here to stay.”** He stated that youth activists have been smart and strategic by limiting the number of demands they make at a time while slowly escalating their demands as they receive a positive response. **One of their demands he says is that the military council be dissolved in favor of a civilian led council that includes members of the military establishment.** While the military is unlikely to agree to this, Telhami argues that they have been smart about addressing demands of the activists, especially in the peaceful replacement of **Ahmed Shafiq**. Telhami states **that at the end of the day it is not about what policy gets implemented but about whether the people trust the government.** It

will take time to build that trust and the protesters will demand it. The lack of trust, he says, will lead to conflict.

On the military and the opposition, Hamid stated that he was surprised to learn that many of the activists saw the military's role as a positive. He noted, however, that some activists stated that their support for the military is more tactical than sincere as they recognize the military as an institution of the Mubarak regime. He states that we will likely see continued tensions between the civil activists and military. He also stated that it is important to note that the military, as an institution, lacks governance training and is therefore likely to make mistakes. Thus, he calls for civilians to be included.

On the question of how Libya differs from Egypt, **Daniel Byman** Libya's unrest has been the most troubling and is the most uncertain. **He stated that the success of Libya will depend not on skirmishes between the opposition and Gadhafi's forces, but rather on the rate of defection.** While we saw defection on the rise in the early days of the protest, the tide has been stemmed in some ways reversed, he says. He states that significant defection of top military leaders, which is unlikely, is the best case scenario for how events will unfold while the worst case scenario is a protracted civil war which drags on. If there is a civil war, Byman states that there will likely be an influx of foreigners, including members of al-Qaeda who will try to manipulate the situation towards their own ends. He argued that military action on the part of the US and Western forces is not likely in the short run and that this protest will run its course best if Libyans accomplish Gadhafi's ouster on their own, assuming that the opposition emerges victorious.

On Tunisia, Telhami stated that the degree of optimism in the country is tangible in Tunisia. He states in Tunisia, like Egypt, the important thing is that the people trust the government. **He stated that the ongoing protests which led to the resignation of Mohamed Ghannouchi were due to the lack of trust.** He discussed the current debate in Tunisia over whether presidential or parliamentary elections come first and the newest proposal which calls for elections to be postponed and for a constitutional council to be formed to form a new constitution. The council would also have the power to appoint a new government or request that the former one stay on for an interim period. The proposal has met with mixed response by activists. Telhami also noted that public opinion of the U.S. is very high in Tunisia given Obama's calls on Ben Ali to leave, the Wikileaks cables, and the failure of the French to address corruption in Tunisia. He also states that the European countries may need to play a bigger role in supporting Tunisia as the U.S. is unlikely to be able to provide sufficient aid given the current Congressional environment.

On the impacts of the protests on Gaza, **Salman Shaikh** stated that Hamas remained quiet during the Egyptian uprisings in an attempt to avoid stating something that could incite protests. However, they view the ouster of Mubarak positively as they hope to gain more recognition and that borders with Egypt may be opened, especially if the Muslim Brotherhood came to power. As these anticipated changes have not yet come to fruition they are pursuing alternate strategies such as supporting the UN resolution put before the Security Council. He states that the focus in the West Bank and Gaza, both on the streets and among the ruling entities, is to promote Palestinian unity. **Given the recent uprisings, Hamas has also seen the rise of internal debates on whether violence is really necessary to bring about change or if they should follow the model of Turkey and Egypt's Islamist parties.** The power of non-violence is a theme that **Salam Fayyad** is trying to incorporate into proposals for a national unity government. Shaikh also stated that he believes that the peace process should continue to be pursued despite fears that failure to resolve the conflict will have a negative impact on the tone of change in the Middle East. He states that it is important to initiate a serious process.

On Jordan, **Shadi Hamid** states that Mubarak's ouster did not leave Jordanian opposition groups optimistic for change because unlike protesters in Egypt, Jordanians are not calling for the King **Abdullah II** to step down. Instead, they are asking the king to yield some of his power to the people with some calling for a constitutional monarchy. Hamid noted, however, that this is unlikely to happen given the fact that Abdullah's rule constitutes

rule of the minority over the majority and that Abdullah has sought over his reign to consolidate power not promote reform. Hamid states that the case is similar to that in Bahrain where the opposition, led by al-Wefaq party is calling for a constitutional monarchy with the cabinet elected by the people. Given the fact that this concession would likely lead to the rise of a Shi'a prime minister, which the Sunni monarchy is unwilling to allow. **Salman Shaikh** noted that bridging the gap between the two sides' desires is difficult and may require outside moderation.

On Oman, Hamid noted that similar to Jordan, the people have not called for the Sultan to step down and criticism of the ruler is forbidden under law. **He states that you see an interesting dynamic in which the protests are pro-monarchy and anti-government, ignoring the fact that it is the Sultan who appoints the ministers.** The protesters, have placed the sultan in the center of their demands by asking the monarchy to give them power. Hamid stated that thus far, the Omani regime is following the GCC approach of paying off its citizens and ignoring the fact that economic and political issues are intertwined. **Shaikh** noted that the economic concessions are band-aids which are unsustainable.

Addressing a question on possible protests in Saudi Arabia, **Salman Shaikh** stated that if we don't see further progress in reforms over the next year we will likely see the number of protests increase leading to greater instability in the region. He stated that King **Abdullah** has the ability to win the hearts and minds of both his family members and others to push through the necessary educational, economic, and political reforms necessary and that there is concern that reforms will stagnate in his absence. This is particularly concerning as Prince Naif is not a reformer and that the large bulge of unemployed youth who have entered religious seminaries may align with more conservative elements in the regime.

Addressing a question over the protesters relations with the military and the Muslim Brotherhood, **Shibley Telhami** stated that the military has been a long standing institution that is only going to give in to protesters demand as much as they have to as they benefit, to some degree, with maintaining the status quo. He stated though that protesters will continue to pressure them. **Shadi Hamid** also stated that the Muslim Brotherhood is pragmatic and as such they are not likely to run a full slate of candidates as they know it will lead to international outcry. He also stated **that the United States must begin to make overtures for dialogue to the group as it is clear that it will play an important role in the future.**

Responding to a question on the role that pro-democracy groups and NGOs can play in Egypt, Telhami stated that the people of Egypt are very proud and don't want to be "taught about democracy." Additionally, they are strong and well organized and as such do not require a great deal of outside support. He stated that they should be allowed to thrive as an indigenous group, but that we can aid them when it comes time for elections. **Daniel Byman** stated that the "wheels are already moving" and those U.S. groups can provide them with resources and ideas to help them implement democracy. **Shadi Hamid** states that there is a role for such groups to play but that they need to address thoughts on the ground and also stated that perhaps we should link civil society groups from activists in recently emerged democracies like Indonesia.

In response to a question on the impact of protests on al-Qaeda, **Telhami stated that these uprisings are "Bin Laden's nightmare" and that they put him on defensive.** However, he noted that failure to bring about change will lead the youth to put their energy elsewhere, possibly in the hands of groups like al-Qaeda. Byman agreed with Telhami noting that these revolutions were carried out by his target audience. He also noted, however, that the U.S. had supported regional dictators especially when it aligned with their fight against terrorism and that this meant the jailing of many suspected terrorists. He stated that the freeing of prisoners should thus be worrisome for the U.S.