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Middle East Realignment: Great Decisions Lecture Series
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Featuring:

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Shibley Telhami: Thanks very much. It's a real honor to be here and to start this great series this year. I know I've participated in the past in this series and it's really a terrific one. I'd like to offer you some reflection on the events that have swept through the Middle East in the past year. And I want to do it in perspective by offering you a comparison that might be helpful.

A few months ago I was in China. I was asked to reflect not only on what international powers including China should be doing in a changing Middle East, but as you can imagine many Chinese were curious could it happen to us. And that question, could it happen to us, forced me to reflect on the events in the Middle East in a slightly different way. And so what I'd like to do today is offering you sort of my conclusions in thinking about the comparison between the Middle East and China when it comes to social and political change. And in the process gain some lever over what's happening.

Now let me start by giving you a little bit of context. I know that everyone around the world including rulers in the Middle East, including American leaders, including scholars, analysts, journalists who have watched the Middle East very closely were taken by surprise by the timing of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, by the rapid pace of change that occurred. We were all taken by surprise up to a point. This happened on a scale that no one anticipated, on a pace that no one anticipated.

And the question is why were people surprised? And so I want to say that up front that really the surprise was more about the timing and the form. There have never been a surprise about the level of anger in the Middle East. In fact, in the decade of polling that I've been doing in the Arab world, an annual Arab public opinion poll that I've conducted in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon, The United Arab Emirates, and Jordan, I started doing it actually in the late 1990s, and every year my conclusion was never when would Arab have reason to revolt. That was never, never the conclusion.

The question that I always came out with why have Arabs not revolted already? That has always been the puzzle over the past decade for analysts, for scholars. When you looked at how seemingly passive the Middle East was over the past decade and you looked at the objective reality, and you looked at the built-up anger at the level of public, the real puzzle for us was always scratch our head and say why haven't people revolted yet. That has always been the question.

Now part of that is people provided different answers but the one answer that was legitimate up to a point that we all sort of accepted was that revolutions don't happen just because people are angry. Even if they were very angry, even it was most people who were very angry. The bottom line is to have revolutions you need that anger to be translated into mass political mobilization in a way that mattered for creating political change. And when you looked around most analysts, certainly most political scientists assumed that in order for you to translate public anger into mass political mobilization you need political parties, or social organizations or at least charismatic leadership. And of course that's what governments knew too.

So all these security services that every single government in the Middle East built up to try to thwart people's efforts at organizing to revolt understood that and they prevented the emergence of legitimate parties. And whenever social organizations emerged as a threat they knew how to contain them. And whenever there was a charismatic leader, they either chopped his head or threw him in prison.

So there was a constant effort to prevent those things from happening and they've succeed throughout. And that's why the assumption was, when you looked at the landscape of the Arab world, you just simply didn't know how that anger was going to translate into political action. It was not possible. And to the extent that anyone predicted that it was going to happen at some point, people said it was going to come through Islamic organizations, in part because they're the only ones who could organize socially in this landscape and at some point they're going to find a way to break through.

And so what we've seen, of course, is something really extraordinary. That is, the events in Tunisia and Egypt took place without political parties, without major social organizations, without charismatic leadership and that is huge. And obviously that's the reason why people call it the Internet revolution because in fact, up to a point it was. It's not that the Internet caused the revolution; but it is that in order for people to get out in the streets in large numbers as they did in

Tunis and Cairo, you needed this organization that happened without existing political organization, the coordination that happened through the media and the Internet.

So one part of this was that this information revolution enabled a rapid mobilization with political consequences on a scale that no one had anticipated. And I'm going to go through that in a bit. I'm going to come back to this issue in a minute, but I offer that as a way of understanding that what I'm going to talk about is not so much the causes, although I will touch on that, as much as the occasion. And when I reflected on the Chinese question to me, and this happened in China what happened in Egypt, my thought was that at some level there are similarities between China and the Arab world and at another level there are also differences. And let me start with the similarities.

The one similarity is the one I just talked about, which is the information revolution. That has had huge impact not just in terms of the ability to mobilize that we have witnessed over the past year in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere, that has rendered political parties less central in the political process. Certainly it has done that, but there was more than that. In fact, when I started doing my public opinion polling in the Arab world a decade ago, and I wrote a proposal to get funding, the proposal was called Media Opinion and Identity in the Arab World. And the idea was that we witnessed in the late 1990s, I wrote an article, that there was an information revolution underway. At that time, if you recall, it was the satellite television revolution.

So we've, you know we seem to forget that the primary engine of the information revolution over the past decade and a half has been the satellite television and not the Internet. And this was so incredibly rapid we also lose sight of that. In 1990, there was no major satellite television network in the Arab world. In 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, the Saudi government forgot to tell his people for a couple of days because they had to figure out first of all whether in fact what position they were going to take prior to having their media report it. Today it's impossible that that would happen.

In 1990 when I asked people, even as early as 2000, when I asked people in Morocco what is your most important source of news, they would say their national television. And Al Jazeera or any transnational television were not there at all. In 2008, 2009, 2010 in every single Arab country where I polled, when you asked them what is your first source of news, they mention a television station outside of their own borders as their number one and number two.

And so you can understand the first thing that happened in that information revolution is that governments lost monopoly over information. And therefore they lost control of the political narrative, which we saw to a great extent in this revolution where when Gaddafi was telling his people, this is Al Qaeda, people were laughing at him. This is the CIA, people were laughing at him because people weren't even watching his TV in Libya as much as they were watching Al Jazeera TV or Al Arabiya TV or BBC or some other station.

So the first order has been actually this satellite television change and it has been remarkable and has taken place in a way that has done three things. Number one is what I just mentioned, rob governments, the monopoly of information. Number two, it has made people aware of what the rest of the world has that they don't have. And there's an empowerment in raising expectations in that. And number three, it provided them with instruments of organization that they lacked. All these were happening even prior to this rapid change in the Internet.

Now the Internet is particularly important in providing this instrument of mobilization unlike television because it's interactive. And that has happened so rapidly I cannot tell you how rapidly that happened. Five years ago in my poll, normally my sample in the poll in six countries is 6000. Sorry 4,000, 4,000 people. And I didn't have enough Internet users who said they used the Internet regularly to be able to conduct statistically meaningful analysis just five years ago.

This year in my October poll, the poll after the revolution, when I asked people when those users of Internet when they received their Internet connection, 27% said just in the past year. The overwhelming majority in the past five years. More than 40% in the past three years. So it is extraordinary. And five years ago when I asked what is your primary source of news, 90% say television. In 2009, just a couple of years ago, 80% say television. In 2011 that's declined to just 60% plus say television with a large number of people say the Internet is their first choice of news and that is especially true for people below 35.

So we have to understand that it isn't that we just were taken by surprise by the impact, but also by the rapidity of expansion. And why that happened, there's a lot of theories about why that expansion happened so quickly over just the past five years. But it is astonishing the speed of it and I think most people didn't quite understand the consequence of that.

In that sense, I think when I'm thinking about the framework of comparing China and the Arab world, there is no doubt in my mind that China is comparable in some ways. Not so much because of satellite television because right now I'm not sure how much from the outside the Chinese get, but certainly the Internet, which is expanding. In fact, my understanding is the last number is 500 million Chinese have access to the Internet. Five hundred million. And you can sensor all you want; it doesn't work.

When I was in China I was staying at a hotel that obviously provided free Internet, presumably that is being watched. There were many websites, including YouTube, that I couldn't theoretically go to. It took me about 30 seconds to get around it, and I'm not some young Chinese whiz kid who knows about the Internet. Immediately the world opened to me as if I was not even in China and I didn't have to do much to figure out how to do that.

So it's not going to work and now the Chinese government is trying to propose the idea of providing the people with free Internet that is government controlled so that they will keep tabs on people and they can lock it so get them hooked on

getting this free Internet. Well it was a brilliant idea; it has promises. But you can imagine that arena is clearly a very important one. That's why I have called this set of events in the Arab world from day one, I've never called them a spring. Not because I'm not optimistic. Actually, by the way I'm more optimistic than most about the future of the Arab world. But because I think that's not what we're witnessing.

I called it the great Arab Awakening. And it's not because there have never been Arab awakenings before. In fact there was a great book called Arab Awakening before, but never on this scale. This is about an empowerment of the Arab public on a scale that we have never watched before. It is about the empowerment of the Arab individual on a scale that we have never witnessed before. And it is an empowerment that is not cyclical, that is not seasonal; it is evolutionary; it is a movement forward. It is empowered by an information revolution that is only expanding. The genie cannot put back in the bottle. So that element of the Arab awakening is with us to stay whatever the consequences.

Now, again when I reflected on the comparison with China, I reflected on another thing. What is this all about? What is this revolution, if you want to call it that, uprising, awakening, what is it about? What do people want? What are they striving for? Well, initially of course it was called the food riots in Tunisia, it wasn't even called a revolution. And there was no question that economics matter; I'll come back to that. Economics always matters and certainly it is a factor in the Arab Awakening. And it's going to be an increasing factor so economics matters.

But economics matters only as a factor in something a little bigger. And that is why almost all Arab revolutionaries from Tunisia to Yemen have been keen on demanding that this is all about quote dignity. Dignity. And that term dignity, don't underestimate what it means. And it is interesting because today is the first anniversary of the fall of the Mubarak regime and within a week millions of Egyptians poured into Tahrir Square. I was there a few day after Mubarak fell. I went into one of these Friday Tahrir Square demonstrations with a million persons. And the chant in Cairo, the most prominent chant in Cairo, the most mesmerizing chant that galvanized the public was very simple. - - . Raise your head; you're an Egyptian. Raise your head; you're an Egyptian. That chant was repeated in Libya the day Gaddafi was killed. Raise your head; you're a Libyan. Raise your head; you're an Arab. Raise your head.

Now think about that for a minute because this was about raising their heads because what happened over a period of decades is that people were not raising their heads when they thought about the country. An Egyptian was not proud to be an Egyptian when they were in France, or they were in Saudi Arabia. They didn't like that the government spoke for them. They were not proud of those people who spoke in the name of Egypt. And that had two dimensions to it, maybe three.

One dimension is that by and large the meaning of being Egyptian or the meaning of being a Libyan, or the meaning of being a Jordanian gets diluted by virtue of equating the ruler and the country. Because when the ruler is the only rule you've

ever known—when you're thinking of Libya you're thinking of Gaddafi; when you're thinking of Egypt you're thinking of Mubarak, so that association becomes linked so it diminishes the value of being who you are.

The second is that in fact the information revolution has had a remarkable impact on the way people define themselves. What we have seen is that over the past decade in the measures that I come up with pertaining to how people define themselves, people's definition of themselves as citizens of the countries has gone down over the decade in favor of either Islamic identity or second Arab identity. And so we have seen in general a trend away from the State.

And that is in part I think a function of the information revolution in the following sense. That the new satellite television stations over the past decade and a half have been catering to a transnational identity. If you are a Qatari television station in 1990, your consumer was the Qatari. In 2012, your consumer is anyone who speaks Arabic because you want to win the biggest market you can from 350 million people instead of the 200,000 citizens of Qatar. And for that reason your prototype consumer is no longer the Qatari or the Yemeni, it is the Arab and slash mostly Muslim. And so for that reason there is a bolstering of these identities over time in part because of this information revolution.

But there's a third reason. And that is that these governments were despised for what they stood for. They were symbols of the humiliation that people experienced. Now that humiliation in part was internal. Obviously the absence of personal freedoms and it has a factor of economics attached to it. But it was more than that. It has in fact been fueled I would say by the entire decade and beyond.

When the U.S. was proposing to Arab rulers that we should wage a war against Iraq in 2003, 90% of the Arab people said absolutely not. They felt it vitally important that that war not be fought. But the rulers in the end listened to the U.S. more than they listened to their people. But that is only one issue over which we see the tradeoff throughout the time that we've been measuring this. On the Arab-Israeli issue, where they're exceptionally angry with Israel and exceptionally sympathetic with the Palestinians, their governments have been seen to be essentially cooperating and maintaining the status quo.

On matters related to heroes who they admire and who they despise, we found throughout the whole decade that the heroes are exactly the types of people the governments despise. Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, even in Sunni-Arab countries like Egypt and Morocco, was most admired for the fact that he seemed to stand up to the United States and Israel. So we have seen this throughout the whole decade in terms of results and I think that explains in some ways why this chant was the first chant that people repeated following the revolution. Raise your head; you're an Egyptian. Raise your head; you're a Libyan.

And I reflected on China and I say well that is not the same in China actually. There is perhaps a sense that the absence of freedoms, they may have a sense of a little bit of, more than a little, of discomfort with authoritarianism and so forth. But as

Chinese, I think the Chinese in 2012 are a proud people and they are raising their heads and that might buffer them and help them in terms of the consequences of what might follow.

The third point that I want to make has to do with social mobility. I focused on the dignity factor, which I think is extraordinarily powerful, but I want to also talk about the economic factor. A lot of people think the economic factor is specifically poor therefore revolution. That's not the way things work. In fact, it's not a coincidence typically in history that those who lead a revolution are not the very poor. Look at what happened in Tunisia and Egypt. It was really upper middle classes and middle classes who are better educated and often actually making good money like the Google executive who I will not name, or others, who led the revolt.

So it isn't—poverty matters but not in a straightforward fashion. Where it matters it is where I called it's the social mobility factor. And the social mobility factor is if I'm poor and I'm talented and I'm hard working do I have a decent shot of moving upward? New York Times had a really good article a couple of weeks ago, I don't know if any of you saw it, about how there is a social mobility gap in America today where America used to be a leader in social mobility. How now there's a big social mobility gap in America that is troubling for social stability in America, particularly in comparison to Europe how we're falling behind.

Well in the Arab world that gap is even bigger and I think there is a sense that merit wasn't a factor in advancement. And a prevailing sense that you can be very talented, very smart and very hardworking; that's not enough to move forward. That is troubling. In China, by the way, I think it's less true. I think there is a merit system that is in place more than there was in the Arab world. Whether it's sufficient or not I'll leave it to experts, but I thought that this comparison might be helpful in understanding the kind of dynamics that are underway.

So where does that leave us? What is to expect? Number one is what I said earlier, which is we have a public empowerment that is with us to stay. And it's not here for a day or two, or a year or two, it's with us for the long-haul and it's only going to expand. Number two, the outcome in every country is going to vary. It isn't going to be quick and it isn't going to be a single outcome. It's going to depend primarily on four factors.

Number one is the extent to which every country is homogenous or heterogeneous. Where there is heterogeneity there is more trouble down the road, prospects of civil war because empowerment, when you have two factions getting empowered, isn't always a good thing. It doesn't lead always to a good outcome I mean. And so in that sense, that's a very important factor down the road.

Second, economics matter. The richer countries can buffer themselves in the short term. We've seen that in Saudi Arabia. The king immediately poured billions and billions of dollars into the public to buffer the public and buy more time. That can help you in the short term and it helps you buy time but it's not going to solve the

problem because the empowerment is going to expand no matter what but it will be a factor.

Number three the extent to which a country is connected to the outside world. Part of the fueling of these uprisings and empowerment of the public is the knowledge that the rest of the world is watching and reacting, and knowing that they're being watched and seen and their information is getting out. So the more connected a - - is the more likely it is to fuel further uprisings. And finally the extent to which the international community will react. In the case of Libya, the outcome was certainly decided by virtue of international intervention, the likes of which we are not likely to see any time soon. So how the international community reacts will also matter for how these things will turn out.

But one thing is very clear. Five years ago most people, when I did a public opinion poll and I presented it, said who cares. Who cares? We have rulers, we can do business with them, that's all we need. They can either ignore the public or bring the public along. For good or for bad that era is over. There is no one today who can ignore public opinion in the Arab world. Not the democratically elected ruler, nor the monarch who wants to stay in power. This is something that is with us to stay. And from my point of view, this is more for the better, even if there is much uncertainty down the road. Thank you very much.

[Applause]

Announcer: Thank you very much. Before we get to questions a quick announcement. On your seat you will find some flyers that give you some healthy discounts on FPA publications. If anyone here is not a member of the FPA then I'd encourage you to please become a member of it. So Professor Telhami, you've agreed to take a few questions. And if I may ask you, how do you think the American policy towards specifically Saudi Arabia, Bahrain should change in view of what you said?

Shibley Telhami: That's a really, really tough one. It's interesting. I asked in the 2011 public opinion poll that I did in October, I asked people to rank foreign powers in terms of who played quote the most constructive role in the Arab uprisings to see what people think. And the number one country right now is Turkey. Roughly half of the Arabs named Turkey as number one. And it's interesting because Turkey was somewhat about ambivalent about intervening in Libya. Turkey by the way appears to be the biggest winner of the Arab Spring in the short term. And in fact, when I asked them about personalities, Erdogan is by far the most favored leader in the Arab world. So Turkey emerges as big as - - .

You get 30% say France, but that's not actually as high as France has done in the past; this is a little bit of a decline. But the U.S. does reasonably well, with 24% saying the U.S. and 20% say China. The interesting thing is these are four top vote getters and they didn't all take the same positions. You got China who's opposing intervention in Syria, the U.S. supporting but somewhat reluctantly, Turkey being more cautious and really almost anti-French. I mean the whole competition

between France and Turkey in the Middle East has been clear. And that really tells you how divided Arabs are about the foreign intervention in the Middle East.

In retrospect, despite the fact that Arabs overwhelmingly wanted to see Gaddafi overthrown, overwhelmingly, when I ask them now in retrospect do they think that the international intervention in Libya was a good thing or a bad thing, in retrospect, now that it's successful because Gaddafi's gone, more people say it was the wrong thing than the right thing. And that tells you something of the ambivalence of the Arabs. On the one hand they want change and help; on the other hand they really don't trust outside powers.

And so whatever we do, whether it's in Bahrain or Saudi Arabia, trust me we're not going to be trusted. But I think Bahrain was a bit of a challenge for the U.S. I mean, it was a painful episode where the U.S. clearly thought that it almost had a deal between the opposition and the king. It fell apart. The American position is that Saudi Arabia really didn't want to see this happen and America's interest in Saudi Arabia is so huge that it's going to be considerably more difficult if something starts happening in Saudi Arabia.