BACKGROUND PAPER

Five Years after the Arab Revolutions:

"The Arduous Road of Democratization and Future Prospects"

An Arab and International Conference at the American University of Beirut

January 21, 22 and 23, 2016

Organized by AUB's Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) and the

Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS)

I. Introduction

Five years ago, a series of Arab revolutions and uprisings broke out and radical change seemed within reach. The revolutions came at a time when many doubted the ability to initiate change in the Arab world, only a minority considered that it is inevitable, once objective circumstances mature. The unexpected revolutions brought a promise of a brighter democratic future.

Although Arab people agreed on the long-term causes of revolutions, they disagreed on understanding their immediate triggers, defining the new leading forces, redefining the preexisting political movements, and on assessing the emerging revolutionary scene.

It is true that the majority of Arabs, whether citizens or researchers, did not foresee the uprisings, despite the authoritarian regimes' continuous oppression and the deteriorating political and economic situation. However, few movements and initiatives came into view to challenge the current situation. Although these movements were limited in time, influence, and space, they have probably pushed the limits by daring to think about resisting oppression.

In addition, the notion of Arab/Islamic "exceptionalism" gained some popularity among the Arab population. While some saw that the notion reflects a cultural uniqueness that resists the process of globalization, usually synonymous with Western hegemony; others considered that this notion evokes on a cultural difference that explains our failure in following the steps of other regions that have transitioned to democracy. Structural problems in Arab societies and culture, due to the distinctive character of Islam, differentiated from other religions. In spite of their disagreement, both proponents

of anti-globalization politics and those who attribute to Islam incompatibility with democracy, converge in overstating otherness over shared human experiences and aspirations, and fall into a culturist view that ignores the power of principles that became significantly universal.

Moreover, ideas and not only emotions were marked by failures and blurred horizons, at least in the foreseeable future. That caused greater doubts in the capabilities of movements for change and in the influence of groups called "civil society organizations" a designation used prescriptively or extended to every non-governmental activity.

Difficulties, uncertainties and erosion of energy and high expectations affected minds and sentiments of people for a long period of time. For this reason, and in view of the acceleration of history in the early phases of the revolution, there was widespread faith in radical change which followed a period characterized by a sense of surprise at the depth and scope of radical transformations. People were confident that what was unlikely for decades has become possible and they are now able to assert their dignity, enjoy freedom and take part in shaping their future.

However, the knowledge about Arab societies was not adequate enough to allow a lucid assessment of realities. Authoritarian regimes and security agencies imposed limitations on researchers and restricted the liberties of those who analyze and discuss the problems of their societies. In fact, they thought that ignorance of social conditions facilitates their work as they monopolize certain focus of knowledge for the benefit of their domination. This policy, led many people to whisper and spread rumors, denounce others, and be cautious in exchanging information and opinions. For that reason, serious studies on the situation in the Arab region remained limited in a number of countries.

Since the early beginnings, observers did not agree on describing the movement for change as protest, uprising, or revolution. The metaphor "Arab Spring" soon prevailed. It is true that this term inspires the season of flowers blooming, but it also describes a short-lived season. The 2001 Damascus Spring did not last; its promises faded away so quickly, and many of its activists were imprisoned. Before that, there was the "Prague Spring" in August 1968 which ended with the invasion of Soviet tanks. Also, in the "1848 Spring", referenced by many historians and commentators, unforeseen and simultaneous revolutions were quickly blocked and led to failure.

Regardless of the comparison with other "springs", a considerable number of people who subscribed to the aforementioned metaphor expressed their fears about the coming "autumn" or "winter". The usage of "Arab Spring" confirms, consciously or unconsciously, that the analogy suggests an explanation and a hypothesis. Perhaps, the use of the metaphor reflects the hesitation to speak about revolutions.

Revolution for some implies a normative idea about its preconditions and theory. Thus, they evaluate a revolutionary scene according their preconceived model in order to determine if it is worthy of the label "revolution." They believe a revolution ought to strive for a radical change beyond the struggle for freedom, the popular demand of the end of despotism and the aspiration to democratic participation.

An ideological vision may have concealed the simple truth that authoritarian regimes are only concerned about self-preservation. The Arab regimes, which were brought down, and those about to fall compensate for their lack of legitimacy by mixing national or nationalist pretense with repressive

violence. They make little or no distinction between the public and private. The public sphere including the land, the people, the institutions, and the political scene, are their private property. Loyalty to the ruler prevails over loyalty to the state or is a prerequisite to it; and the will of the ruler transcends laws.

Although Arab revolutions share demands, claims, and protest strategies, the specifics of every national situation could not be overshadowed. Societies seem concerned about their domestic problems more than about their pan-Arab aspirations. For that reason, some in the West and in our region were led to state that politics has shifted to where it belongs, becoming a primarily local affair. Issues of freedom, democracy, individual dignity, and social justice prevailed over the causes of the Arab nation, including its position in the world, its renaissance, and liberation from foreign hegemony. But the influence of cultural affinities and the feeling of a common future could not be discarded. That being said, others minimized the importance of differences between societies, their histories, and the diverse orientations of reformists and revolutionaries.

Today, worried and fearful questions are present in every discussion on the fate of Arab revolutions. However, the legitimate concerns are one thing, and the aggravation of fears, often engineered, is another. Therefore, we have to address the concerns of those worried about the future of the revolutions, and assess the influence of exaggerated or manipulated fears.

More often than not, disappointment results from exaggerated idealistic enthusiasm for the Arab revolutions, especially that the revolutions surpassed the expectations of both the authoritarian regimes and those who oppose them. But it is fueled by claims of those who amplify the difficulties of transition, vilify its leaders, demonize Islamists among them, and make improper analogies to serve their ends.

Both arrays of disappointment are comprehensible, but respecting the first and being aware of the risks of the second require acknowledging that everybody feels worried at the times of transition and change of power. Revolutions are full of pitfalls and contradictory opportunities; power relations are changing, constantly. However, acknowledging legitimate concerns does not mean they should not be subjected to a critical examination in order to avoid generalization and preconceived explanations of different revolutionary trajectories.

This conference will revisit the Arab revolutions to explore the achievements and failures of the last five years, their causes and future prospects, and define their commonalities and differences. In addition we will examine if and how processes of change lead to unexpected results. This paves the way to address the following main questions: Has the "Arab Spring" ended, and has it thus brought reverse effects? Should we approach this issue in light of the concept of social change? Do we have, in case we decide to use such term in our research, to look at change as a long-term historical process open to multiple possibilities?

To be sure, we will not be bound by pre-set ideas or theories of democratic transition; we need not concentrate on discussing or refuting them. The conference will be structured around cross-cutting topics, but will give the necessary attention to the specificities of every country. Moreover, and in spite of the importance of comparisons, they are not a prerequisite for the approaches to the plurality of situations.

II. The Topics:

In this framework, the conference will tackle four main interrelated topics:

1. The State: Its Structure and the Way it Impacts the Difficult Transition

This topic covers the following issues: the emergence of hereditary republics; identification between power and the state; the effect of the state on revolutions; the effect of the revolutions on the state; the modern Arab state between institutional fragility and the strength of security agencies; excessive state violence in the face of revolutions and protest movements; the roles of military and security institutions; the redefinition of these roles in the new structure of the political system, especially in the first year of the outbreak of revolution; and finally, what are the role of the state and the nature of its relationship with power according to the various revolutionary patterns?

2. Democracy: Spontaneous Revolutions and Organized Forces

Is there an Arab democratic alternative supported by a genuine social base? Is there a real social demand for democracy? What is the role of transitional justice and the legal and judicial institutions in making, impeding, or even reversing democratic change? Do the roles, of institutions as manifested in the concrete situation, provide legitimacy to main political actors? Are they essential in consolidating the process of democratic transition? What is the role of the media, particularly satellite TV channels, in the aforementioned context?

3. Recent Dynamics in Society

What is the relationship between traditional society and civil society during the past five years? How did inherited civil structures reemerge, and is this reemergence functional or structural? To what extent is this determined by power-sharing? What is the impact of the advocacy of federalism and regional self-rule? Is political violence structural in traditional societies with strong sub-national identities? What are the consequences of the Islamic/secular polarization on the intricate process of democratization, on aggravating of the dynamics of social fragmentation, and on impairing social harmony during the stages of transition? Who are the Islamic and secular actors in the polarization? Furthermore, what are the effects of social media on the current situation and what are its limits? Is the role of the media exaggerated in such a way that it appears more influential than the socio-political factors in the outbreak of the uprisings and revolutions? Or else, is their role merely a technical and complementary one, serving exchange and political mobilization?

4. Regional and International Polarizations and their Impact on Revolutions

What relationship between internal dynamics and foreign influence in a turbulent geo-political context that is caught between a web of international interests, the political and military "game of nations," and international humanitarian law? In addition, what are the consequences of the erosion of

the traditional concept of sovereignty, i.e. the Westphalian sovereignty, especially in a phase where states exercise excessive use of power and violence that falls beyond the standards and the limits of national laws? Moreover, what is the role of direct intervention of foreign state agencies in the revolutionary scene? Does the direct or semi-direct involvement of regional and international parties in the socio-political revolutionary context enhances the possibility of structural changes in the regional order, based on the Unitarian sovereign-state, of new state systems, whether federalist or capable of accommodating regional autonomy or constitutionalizing communalism.

III. Format and Languages

Arabic and English will be the languages of the conference and papers. Some sessions will be public.

IV. Requirements for Papers

Interested scholars are expected to abide by the following requirements when submitting their papers:

a) A concise summary of the proposed research paper, approximately between 500 to 700 words in length, which covers the main outline and contains: the paper's main thesis or arguments, and specification of the research problem. The above should be submitted **no later than June 30, 2015**, to both Ms. Nermine El Horr (IFI; ne70@aub.edu.lb) & Mr. Nerouz Satik (ACRPS; nerouz.satik@dohainstitute.org).

b) Summaries can be submitted in both Arabic and English.

c) Summaries will be judged by a panel of academic referees who will notify the relevant author of their decision in writing by October 30th, 2015.

d) Roundtrip ticket (economy class) to and from Beirut, four nights of accommodation and meals will be covered for presenters.

e) Final papers need to be submitted by end of November, 2015.