



The "Arab Awakening": Western and [far] Eastern Perspectives

Wednesday June 8, 2011

Dr. Michael Hudson's presentation, as part of the Issam Fares Institute's "Lunch Time Talks", was focused on the diversity of perspectives on the so-called "Arab Spring". Hudson broke down his argument into three segments: an approximate summary of his *Jadaliyya* piece "Awakening, Cataclysm, or Just a Series of Events? Reflections on the Current Wave of Protest in the Arab World", a segment on East Asian and South East Asian perspectives, and a segment on Western (specifically American) perspectives on the matter.

"What is in a name?" and rhetoric

Acknowledging the challenges currently facing social scientists in understanding the popular movements across the Arab world, Dr. Hudson argued that caution should be exercised in labeling these movements. Providing examples of various descriptive terms he has come across, including: cataclysm, epidemic, virus, awakening, *nahda* (renaissance), Hudson warned that the implications of subjective categorization would undoubtedly affect conclusions.

Dr. Hudson expressed the importance of staying away from "conventional wisdom" on the region with regards to interpreting the trajectory and potential outcomes of the movements. He highlighted six debatable notions: (1) the durability of Arab "authoritarianism" and the "*mukhabarat* state", (2) democratization as an "inappropriate" or unrealistic goal for the Arab world, (3) the Passivity of populations, and the "opium of the rentier state" and *mukhabarat* as deterrence to popular mobilization, (4) "Arab nationalism is dead, and people are reverting to their primordial affiliations," and (5) the notion that the structure and regional balance of the Arab world is stable, with the state as its prime structure.

Dr. Hudson framed his perspective on how to study the Arab popular movements through five questions examining the historical and theoretical context of "the apparent ripple effect". (1) "Is it really like a disease, or is it a cure?" Hudson emphasized here the impact of "subjective labeling" on conclusions reached; "If you are analyzing a 'contagion' you are tempted not just to study what it is but to find ways to eradicate it." He went on to state that "the wave" suggests the emergence of political legitimacy as a fundamental issue; "Why should we obey you?" (2) Are the Arab popular movements "monolithic" or "plural", or "simply a series of (fortunate or unfortunate) events not significantly related to each other"? Though Hudson recognizes the need for further careful observation of the events, he highlights links between the various movements, despite their individual focuses on their respective governments and leaders. "It seems to be all about governance: a demand for meaningful popular participation, the condemnation of authoritarianism and corruption, the call for better governance, and a demand for social and economic development." (3) Assuming that the movements are linked, how do we account for it? Hudson argues that the fervor spread in several ways, notably through the use of social networking mediums and media as a "force multiplier"- though he noted that he does not consider social networking platforms to be the singular mobilizing force. (4) Are the Arab countries equally "susceptible to the virus"? Here Hudson responded, "probably not". "We should be careful in assuming that "the Arab street" is a homogenous entity, similar across the Arab world." Finally, (5) what happens when the people power meets the tanks? And, will these movements be stopped by superior firepower and weaponry? We are beginning to see the

answers as "the wave of protests has run into serious opposition from entrenched regimes and security apparatuses."

East Asian Viewpoints

With the use of recently acquired anecdotal experience, and the expertise of his colleagues at the newly established Middle East Institute and the University of Singapore, Hudson offered a range of perspectives on the Arab Spring from publications and analysts across Eastern Asia. Scholars in the region have compared the North African uprisings to the overthrow of President Suharto of Indonesia in 1998, following the Asian Financial Crisis (1997). Since Suharto's removal, Indonesia has gone through "an uneasy but significant transition to more democratic practices". Jeremy Kingsley, a scholar at the Middle East Institute (Univ. of Singapore), argues that indeed there are applicable lessons to be learned from the Indonesian case study. Kingsley highlights 6 issues in particular: (1)Religious demographics, (2)Accommodation of minorities, (3)Tangible benefits and the economic dimension, (4)Elections, (5)Legal reforms and institution building, and (6)Corruption. To encapsulate a general view from Asian analysts, Middle Eastern reformers should take note of the Asian experience insofar as "the negative economic effects that may be collateral damage coming out of the Arab protest movement."

Based on further research in the respective areas, and taking into account their respective economic and political status, Hudson summarized people's opinion in various Asian countries. To generalize, Asian attitudes toward the Arab movements are cautious, drawing conclusions from comparisons to their own regional political movements, Asian analysts fear potential economic fallout, predominantly as a result of poorly organized transition of power. Lee Kuan Yew, Minister Mentor of Singapore, does not foresee transition to democracy for Arab states. In Malaysia perspectives are strongly focused on the economic impacts of the movements and cite high oil prices as the root of the "political ripple effect". A professor in Indonesia put emphasis on grievances resulting from increasing prices of basic needs, and governments' failure to provide for their people. A Vietnamese professor, inspired by the uprisings in the Arab world, called for the mobilization of the Vietnamese against the current regime. A publication in Thailand stated that the Obama administration should realize that it is no longer sufficient to rely on dictators to protect US interests in the Arab region. In China, where officials took a strong stance against the protests, a headline read: "Online calls for Jasmine revolution, lead officials to ban sale of the Flower" Indian analysts emphasized the importance of calculating Indian alliances and affiliations in such a time of change in the Arab world. One scholar emphasized the need to veer away from close association to Israel, in order to protect Indian relations in the gulf, and consequently protect Indian economic growth.

American Viewpoints

In examining Western viewpoints on the Arab Spring, Hudson focused on the range of American views from liberal to conservative, and neo-conservative. Hudson summarized the libertarian view with Obama's enthusiasm and positive attitude toward democratization in the Arab world; it should be "nurtured" and the US should "get on the right side" of it. He also quoted the Cato Institute's recommendation for the US not to get too involved in the movements.

In contrast, the conservative and pro-Israel perspectives are less inclined to view a positive outcome. Articles in the Jerusalem Post postulate that "democratic Islam" will take over as the "Facebook Revolution looses to the Muslim Brotherhood", and complain that the West will "overlook [this] insidious reality". The Washington Institute on Near East Policy published commentary by Ehud Ya'ari cautioning that the uprisings "mean hard times for Israel" with the transfer of power from the governments to people in the streets or squares ("square-ocracy"). Ya'ari projects: a less friendly government in Egypt, and instability in the Sinai giving Hamas, Iran, and Hezbollah the "chance to take advantage of the situation". The Washington Institute also published a piece by Martin Kramer arguing against the idea that the Arab Spring has not united the Arab world; "if there is any unifying

cross-border thread it is more likely to be the brotherhood's pan Islam rather than Arab unity." Conservatives see the movements as fueling anti Israeli sentiment. The Heritage foundation published recommendations supporting US intervention in Libya and the ousting of Kaddafi.

Concluding remarks

"If you want to shape these transitions in the right direction, it is up to public intellectuals, academics, and journalists to focus people on the issues of accountability as a way to legitimize the new form of rule. You have to get lawyers and activists to insist that transitional governments do this so that you can have, eventually, legitimate rule in the new order."

"Let me suggest that the causes of the Arab Spring are over-determined; there are plenty of different plausible explanations for why people rise up. I would go back to simple rules to understand why. Take things at face value; if you want to know why they revolted, look at what they did. It is primary political grievances, about the legitimacy of political rule, that have been driving all of these protest movements."

"I would say that we are all turning out to be economic determinists. I think we should be careful about doing that. If you think like these beleaguered rulers- they're economic determinists too- you're not going to solve it essentially through economic means. If you don't deal with the political issue, you're not going to have a happy transition."

Relevant Publications

Michael Hudson, ["Awakening, Cataclysm, or Just a Series of Events? Reflections on the Current Wave of Protest in the Arab World"](#)

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