



Issam Fares Institute for Public
Policy and International Affairs

معهد عصام فارس للسياسات
العامة والشؤون الدولية

The Square: Panel Discussion
Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs
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By Nour Nassif

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI), in collaboration with Human Rights Watch screened the Oscar-nominated documentary [The Square](#), at the American University of Beirut on March 20th. The movie narrates the story of the Egyptian Revolution through the eyes of activists that meet in Tahrir Square. The screening was followed by a panel discussion with Mr. Nadim Houry, Deputy Director of Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa Division and Dr. Asya El-Meehy, an IFI Affiliated Scholar.

According to Mr. Houry, Egypt's revolutionaries are currently being sidelined or jailed, while armed forces continue to disperse protests and detain hundreds. Egypt is going through an "environment of witch-hunt", one that has greatly intensified under General Sisi. This leaves the future of democratic consolidation in jeopardy. The Egyptian society is slipping back into old habits of trusting the regime to ensure security in exchange for democratic freedoms. Mr. Houry sees that Egyptian society is based on four pillars – army, deep state (Moubarak and his loyalties), the Muslim Brotherhood, and the civil society. After the revolution, there was a decline in the deep state's influence. Following the ouster of Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood was suppressed along with the civil society. All this has worked to fortify the position of the army in the society. For Mr. Houry, the only way forward is through finding consensus to move into negotiations through state-building.

The audience raised concerns over the current pessimism of Egyptian activists who feel their personal security is gravely at stake. Some saw that activists failed to keep their momentum because their excessive idealism stops them from engaging in any form of dialogue. Dr. El-Meehy stated that discouragement of the youth is a normal result of the setback that the revolution is going through. However, creativity and major acts of courage grow from past experiences. The youth will no longer accept the ultra-nationalist discourse in Egypt as a cover up for human rights abuses. The experiences in Tahrir Square have been an experiment in social dialogue between different factions of activists; the secularists, Islamists, and leftists. The early attempt to rewrite the social contract was crushed by the army that saw it as a threat to its unquestionable power. This is apparent in the new Egyptian constitution that guarantees unprecedented powers to the army and its institutions.



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The need for a leader for a revolution to be successful, and a proper strategy to fulfill calls and demands was addressed. Dr. El-Meehy agrees with the statement on the need for a leader and states that grassroots movements usually have weak leadership structures. However, they are in an environment where citizens learn and practice the art of leadership. Thus, there is hope that the next round of protests would be different and well strategized.

Mr. Houry concluded the discussion by proclaiming that we have expected too much in far too little time from activists. Change will take time and being under dictatorship rule for so long suppresses and undermines any initiative to practice leadership. The disorganization of the revolution and the lack of a leadership figure that could be incarcerated led to its success. However, this was also its weakness in the aftermath of the events once the need to make decisions materialized. He goes on to state that democracy is a slow process and only time will tell the direction that the Egyptian Revolution will take.