After the Uprisings: The Arab World in Freefall, Fragmentation or Reconfiguration?

A call for papers for an international conference at Princeton University

March 4th and 5th, 2016

New realities and challenges confront the region. State fragmentation and occasional collapse, sectarian conflicts, authoritarian resilience, stifled civil societies, economic devastation, soaring unemployment, massive refugee flows, the emergence of new non-state actors and the “Islamic State”, recalibrated big power interventions in the region, and the affirmation of long-standing regional powers are some of the new trends and developments facing the Middle East region. Alongside these challenges, there are new opportunities as well. Societies are far more committed to principles of social justice. And civil societies and organizational life are at the forefront of many debates. This conference will bring together academics, policy-makers, civil society activists and intellectuals to discuss these pressing issues.

We are particularly interested in three related dimensions of the situation across the Middle East, especially in Arab countries. How have socio-economic and political conditions changed since the uprisings started five years ago, and how have ordinary citizens perceived such change? Has the demand for social justice been expressed in the activities and policies of governments, political groups and civil society as a whole, and have any moves towards democratization promoted this demand? How are regional and international political relations evolving, and is any change a consequence of continuing injustices perceived by groups of citizens on the ground?
We will convene at Princeton University on March 4th and 5th. We especially urge social scientists to send proposals. Themes to be covered at the conference include:

I. Public Opinion, Social Justice Demands and Civil Society in the Arab World
   - What are the preferences of ordinary citizens given regional developments?
   - Have citizen priorities changed during the past five years?
   - Do we know the balance in citizen perceptions among rights, justice, jobs and security?
   - What roles are civil societies playing in everyday life and contestation?
   - Have any Islamist or secular parties stepped up to play a more practical role in promoting social justice issues?
   - What are some of the successes and setbacks experienced?
   - What are the new societal cleavages? Islamism/Secularism? Cohort cleavages? Other ideological cleavages?

II. Economic Development and Social Justice
   - Have priority developmental challenges evolved or changed in recent years? Have citizen demands become more explicit or changed in other ways?
   - Can we identify new improvements? Persistent old realities?
   - Is a new economic social contract being negotiated in any Arab country?
   - Have any constitutional or legislative changes in the past five years promoted social justice demands and rights in Arab countries?
   - Have basic social and economic conditions improved or worsened in the past five years? What are the political implications of this?

III. Authoritarian Reconsolidation and Democratization
   - What progress has been made on the democratization front?
   - What actors or dynamics have driven any progress towards democratization?
   - How have authoritarian systems maintained and reasserted themselves?
   - Will the Arab world remain exceptional in its authoritarian ways?
IV. Regional Instability, Sectarian and other New Conflicts:

- Are sectarian conflicts the new norm in the Middle East?
- Are Sunni-Shia, Kurdish-Arab, Iranian-Arab, Alawite-Sunni, and other such tensions genuine, or mostly proxies for other reasons for conflict?
- The ISIS-Islamic State challenge: lasting or transient?
- Does ISIS-AlQaeda-Jabhat Nusra expansion reflect substantial popular support? What are the reasons that drive people to support such groups? Are political, religious, socio-economic or other grievances the main drivers of these groups’ growth?
- Are existing Arab states like Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya threatened by these movements?
- Civil wars and rattled states: Similarities and differences in the wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen.
- Can federal, confederal, decentralized, secessionist or autonomy models of statehood resolve the conflicts in states now in civil war?
- Palestine: Sidelined by new conflicts, or an underlying cause of the region’s troubled condition?

V. International Relations: Europe, the US, Russia and Asia

- Are the US and Russia expanding, reducing or merely restructuring their traditional engagements in the Middle East?
- How does the regional assertion of Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey impact the role of the great powers in the region?
- Is Israel passively watching events in the region, or seeking a niche role in the changes underway?
- How will the Iran nuclear agreement influence regional and international policy shifts?
- How do regional and world powers interact with non-state powers like Hizbullah, Ansarullah (Houthis), rebel groups in Syria, or militias in Iraq?

These are broad outlines of topics to be covered at the conference. Any other subjects related to these will be considered. Abstracts should be no more than 400 words. All travel expenses (including roundtrip economy fare tickets) will be covered. We especially urge proposals from the Middle East.

Please submit your abstract by September 5, 2015 to PrincetonAUBconference@princeton.edu. Accepted applicants will be notified by September 20. Papers should be between 25-40 pages. Conference organizers will discuss relevant publication opportunities (edited volumes, special journal issues, and the Monkey Cage Blog) at the conference.