



Peace and Security Funders Group

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS FUNDERS GROUP

IHRFG-PSFG FEDERAL POLICY BRIEFING WASHINGTON DC

POLITICAL EARTHQUAKES IN THE ARAB WORLD

Wednesday, March 30, 2011

4:30 – 5:30pm

Speakers:

Zainab Salbi, Founder and CEO, Women for Women International

**Shibley Telhami, Anwar Sadat Professor for Peace and Development, University of Maryland;
Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution**

Moderator: **Steve Riskin, Program Director,
United States Institute of Peace**



Shibley Telhami started the session by providing his interpretation of recent events in the Middle East. In recent years the gap between the government and people in the Middle East and North Africa has been continually widening, prompting the question “why haven’t people revolted already?” Mr. Telhami attributes that to a lack of space to organize and revolt. An enabling force of these revolts has been an information revolution, which took away the monopoly of information away from governments, empowered people by linking them to the outside world, and provided tools to organize without the need for political parties or political leaders.

Mr. Telhami highlighted several implications for the United States:

- 1) Public empowerment is here to stay; public opinion in the Arab world cannot be ignored any longer. For example, 2 million additional individuals are using the internet now than before the Egyptian revolution.
- 2) This proves the success of peaceful revolutions, and it is in American interest to support the public, as this type of revolution is the anti-thesis of militant revolutions.

Impacts on U.S. foreign policy:

1. There will be anger with American foreign policy and this will put pressure on the U.S. to change course, as we need to figure out how to be supportive.
2. There is a direct impact on the U.S. stance on Israel/Palestinian relations. Mr. Telhami believes that there will be pressure against a deal in the short term, but that long term chances for an agreement have increased.

3. The current power of Iran in the region is partially due to a lack of leadership in the Arab world. That has now changed; there is a rise in Arab pride. "Raise your head, you are an Egyptian". This will be problem for Iran. However, Iran will gain if the Arab/Israeli conflict remains sore point in Arab countries' relationships with the U.S.

Zainab Salbi opened by sharing a story about introducing an Italian friend to the film, "Lion of the Desert," which portrays what the Italians did to Libya. She contends that the U.S. must be conscious that emotions of the past are still very much alive in the Middle East, that there is anger and frustration with governments supported by the U.S. This is about economic colonialism. Egyptians do not have their own wheat or rice, all of this is purchased from the U.S., making the Egyptian economy dependent of that of the U.S. This is a critical moment in seeing how the U.S. will respond to the revolutions in the MENA region.

What else do we need to watch for?

- 1) Women. Many Arab women took part in the demonstrations and are now being told to go back home. We need to watch for that in terms of women's rights, but also because women are an indicator for the direction of society and the patterns of behavior of the new regime.
- 2) The emergence of new leaderships. How do we provide opportunities for them to grow? Who will be the new leadership of the Middle East? Ms. Salbi believes that things will go through a bad stage before a good stage. We need to budget for chaos and pain rather than be surprised by it (i.e. what happened in Iraq)

Ms. Salbi sees the role of media as where there is a lot of potential and hope.

Question & Answer:

Q: What principles ought to be guiding U.S. policy now and how do we pursue this?

A: The U.S. needs to take the universal position of being supportive of peaceful demonstrations seeking democracy and freedom. Bahrain does present a very complex set of issues for the U.S., but it is still within American interest to advocate for the people of Bahrain. Not all of these calls for change will result in revolutions, but will open a space for negotiations between governments and people.

Q: Can you speculate a bit about the impact of Western intervention in Libya from the Arab public's perspective? Is it seen as war of western aggression?

A: Opposition to Gaddafi is almost universal. He is reviled in the Arab world by both the public and governments, which is unprecedented. Recent polls have seen only 1/4th of respondents against the intervention, 1/2th in support, and 1/2 neutral. In another poll, 1/3rd of respondents were against. Overall people in the Arab world do not trust the U.S., but see the U.S. as the lesser of two evils. It is not the intervention but what happens after the intervention that will matter.

Q: For years the Egyptian military has received billions of dollars in U.S. aid and plays a large role in the corporate sector. What do you see as the future role of the military?

A: The military did initially support Mubarak and was anchored in the regime, but as the force of the public mounted, members of the military began to switch allegiance. At some level people do respect the military and want a strong Egyptian military, but there is distrust, especially

amongst young demonstrators, and some people fear that a tacit deal has been made between the military and Muslim Brotherhood to give each other more space.

Q: Have efforts to encourage peaceful protesting been supported by Arab foundations?

A: Most of the protestors were young, educated, middle class liberals. They worked very deliberately to transcend the government's painting of them as terrorists.

One of the major vehicles to encourage social change is media. One example is that of an Iraqi woman leaving her husband after twenty years of abuse, because she saw it on a Turkish soap opera. How do we capitalize on this opportunity? How do we encourage new images of women in the Middle East?

Al Jazeera has grown in popularity in English language countries and in the Middle East, there are many female reporters. Sixty percent of college graduates are women, yet less than ten percent are employed in the formal sector. This story is disconnected, we need to connect it.