

## Round table discussion: an insight into the political changes in the Middle East and the Arab world<sup>i</sup>

<b>Date:</b>	Wednesday October 5, 2011
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(Shiraishi) Thank you all for being here today. At IDE-JETRO, we have been watching the recent changes in the Middle East with great interest. In addition, we have invited Professor Lisa Anderson, president of The American University in Cairo, to the international symposium we will be co-hosting with the World Bank at the end of January next year, where we attempt to understand the Middle East in light of these political changes from a multilateral point of view. Today I'd like to hear everyone's frank and candid opinions.

The format of the discussion will be free but first I thought we could hear how everyone sees the status quo and the latest situation in the grander scheme of things, and then let the discussion develop from there. Shall we start with you, Professor Nagasawa?

(Nagasawa) Ok. In regard to this chain of movements, first there was the view of the Middle East framework. Someone made a start of framing the phenomena within Middle East. Then a series of movements were certainly discussed for some times as the Middle East Revolutions. But now, as everyone agrees, the movements are defined as the Arab Revolution.

Thus when viewing the current situation as the Arab Revolution, I believe that we are in the midst of the most significant turning point since the time of the July Revolution of 1952 about 60 years ago in Egypt and the various movements simultaneously arising in the Arab world. In my view, it was the era of the movements of Arab Nationalism. The regimes created at the time have become outdated to a great deal and must be entering a period of structural changes. However, this can be said only for countries with a republican system, with the situation being a bit different in countries with monarchies.

If we look at the trend over an even longer period of time, prior to the Revolution of 1952 there was a period when a major nationalist movement, called the 1919 Revolution, took place where Egypt sought independence from England, and so it is also possible to view that this is the first major change since the 1919 Revolution. That was the time after World War I when the framework of territorial states in the Arab world was established. Among various prospects, we hear that these current movements may grow to the extent that could destroy that framework. However, I suspect that that will happen immediately. An Arab friend of mine says that a new Arab unification may be expected to come true. I think that would be difficult but the depth of the revolution might go that far.

Thirdly, as I mentioned earlier, in terms of regime changes, this chain of movements is named the Arab Revolution, but this revolution will probably greatly affect the entire regional system of the Middle East. We must take it into our considerations how the two non-Arab powers in the region, Iran and Turkey, will be concerned with the Arab world, as well. It's a beginning of a new era. It's a significant historical change. Needless to say, but how NATO, the US, etc are to be involved in this region will be relevant. However, whatever happens, I think for structural changes in this whole region, it will take some time longer.

(Shiraishi) Thank you very much. Now, Professor Ikeda.

(Ikeda) I don't have a strong historical framework like Professor Nagasawa so my perspective comes from following the Middle East peace process on a daily basis. I think the features of the uprisings have, unsurprisingly, a lot to do with the military of each country. This is relatively easy to understand when we look at Tunisia where it quickly distanced itself from the regime, Egypt where it was at least impartial and ultimately abandoned Mubarak, in the case of Gaddafi it was already split from the start, and in Syria the army is still supporting the regime.

Naturally, because this kind of political-military relationship, or the state of the military, in a sense reflects the society of that country, even if the cause or structure of the spark of the uprising in each country is common, I get the impression that it manifests varies depending on the tendency of the army of each country.

Further, one point of interest was whether or not the Arab Spring would actually trigger a Palestinian Spring when the uprising reached Israel and Palestine. Actually in mid-March, mid-May and early June opposition movements of primarily younger generations like the Arab Spring and unlike anything previously, took place within Palestine. They appear to have stopped abruptly as of June 5, but are regarded as obviously new movements and will probably have a great impact on, for example, the future peace process.

In short, until now central Palestine has basically split into the two factions of Fatah and Hamas and, stuck between a rock and a hard place, in May it was briefly expected that a peace agreement would be struck but even after that it came to a complete standstill and has not progressed. Opposition from the younger generations to this situation from both factions boiled up and the existing power of political parties and political power is starting to feel threatened.

What is particularly interesting is that this is showing more strongly in Hamas. When the uprising in Egypt was reaching its peak, Hamas itself was closing the door to Gaza with extraordinary speed, desperate to stop it spreading to Gaza at any cost. On the other hand, Fatah has always been planning to somehow adopt the young movement but it has not yet been successful. Both sides are truly perplexed and confused as to how to handle the movement.

We don't yet know what the people involved in this Palestinian Spring-like movement want but they don't seem to be showing much interest in the current two-state solution for peace. Frankly speaking, there is an element of seeking freedom rather than a nation, a fight for dignity rather than a liberation of rights. Inevitably there seems to be an affinity for one-state, a one-state solution rather than a two-state solution but this is, unsurprisingly, a fairly big change.

What is interesting is that the same thing is happening in Israel too. This summer about 400,000 primarily young people were also mobilized in Israel and basically it was no longer about peace: they took to the streets demanding something be done about high rents and unemployment. It's clear that the demonstrations were carried out by the younger generation, as the tent cities were vacated en masse as the new academic semester began.

How we view this chain of circumstances as relevant to regional stability is not even entirely settled between all of us yet but chaos may after all be unavoidable in the short term. Particularly in the Middle East peace framework of the past, the stable relationship between Egypt and Israel, which played the role of a kind of anchor, has become very strained as can be seen in the recent storming of the Israeli Embassy in Cairo. In fact, in the context of this Arab Spring, now Turkey, while not an Arab nation, is enhancing its self-assertion. Particularly in the issue of dealing with last year's raid on a Gaza aid flotilla, relations between Turkey and Israel have become hostile in a way not seen before. In spite of everything until then, relations that were thought to be stable to some degree such as those between Egypt and Israel, and Israel and Turkey, that functioned as an anchor to the tentative peace framework have already started to shake and, if we think about the peace environment from now on, this has become a major cause for concern.

This is probably all I can say at this point in time.

(Shiraishi) Thank you. How about you, Mr. (Hitoshi) Suzuki?

(Hitoshi Suzuki) Because I have studied Iran and, these last ten years or so, Afghanistan, I'm going to talk about the Middle East region from an eastern perspective. Lately it has been said that Emmanuel Todd's *Le rendez-vous des civilisations* predicted this democratic movement in the Arab world. But in having a quick read of his book prior to the uprisings that have started since the beginning of this year, I didn't feel he was saying anything new. Iran also falls within the scope of Todd's discussion but with Iran in particular, I have seen the post-revolution social changes out in the field and have very often felt what Todd is discussing, and while the conditions may be different, problems arising among young people were also pointed out previously when I talked with Egypt and Arab researchers. So I didn't expect that the book would come to be considered a book that predicted such political change.

One thing that comes to mind as being related to this is the Egyptian elections in November and December last year. I only skimmed through the media reports but those elections were totally staged by the government and the result was that the ruling political party monopolized something like 80% of the seats. To be honest, when I read those reports I couldn't help but feel contempt toward the Egyptian people. Even Iran, at least before the presidential elections the year before last, was said to be a country that held relatively democratic elections in comparison to other Middle Eastern nations. In contrast, the situation in Egypt, a major power of the Middle East, made me view the situation, I'm sorry to say, with a feeling of disillusionment. But to my surprise, this in a sense became the flash point and with the fact that it led to the January 25 revolution, I am reflecting a little on my own over-pessimistic view.

A similar thing is happening in Iran and every region of the Arab world, with young people gaining force as a new political core. However the decisive difference between Iran and the Arab world was perhaps the 1979 revolution. What is currently happening in Iran is post-revolution social change, whereas in the Arab world this

democratic reform movement is probably emerging after a long dictatorship. So even countries like Egypt are currently experiencing a democratic reform or a political change called "revolution," and it is said that there is a fear that they may end up like Iran but I feel that will ultimately not be the case, or they may not end up like Turkey which has not experienced such big political changes, so it may be impossible to do anything but search for an entirely new form.

Talking about what I have felt over a shorter span of about ten years, in the ten or so years since 9/11, I think the relative importance for America, for instance, has been shifting significantly to the eastern region of the Middle East including the Gulf countries, Iran and Afghanistan. At the same time that meant that US forces began to be stationed in those areas, while individual countries also began to strengthen militarization, which I believe had the opposite of the first intentions and actually led to the spread of a sense of impending crisis throughout the Arab world.

I think there are perhaps two points to be considered as to whether this situation centering in the future Arab world will become more stable or when it will actually secure a stable system. The first issue is, to what extent it will establish a "civil society" or rather, whether it will even establish one. The second is, in what form the Middle Eastern system that has continued since the end of the Second World War as a regional system will find a new stable stage.

This is the outline of what I am thinking at the moment.

(Shiraishi) Thank you. Next we'll have Associate Professor (Emi) Suzuki.

(Emi Suzuki) I've got two thoughts on the political changes in the Arab region. The first is on the expression "Arab Spring." Even in the Arab region I have heard the expression "Arab Spring" in Arabic from time to time but this is a translation from the Western media. The use of this term shows that Western intellectuals and those in the media compare this chain of Arab political changes to the Czechoslovakian revolution movement of 1968 called the "Prague Spring" and the 1989 Eastern European revolutions. However, since the collapse of the Ben Ali administration in Tunisia, there have been a spate of simultaneous protests in the Arab region but people have realized that the governments will not collapse like dominos and will not turn towards democracy, thus this term is no longer being used as frequently. In terms of the difference between the political changes in the Arab region and the Eastern European revolutions, with the Eastern European revolutions, there was a political and economic regime model in place in the Western European nations on their western borders to move towards after the revolutions. However in the case of Egypt and Tunisia, it was a revolution after the failure of a move to a market economy that those Western European nations had moved towards, and so not being able to see the path ahead is a decisive difference. I'm going to talk mainly about Egypt as I am focusing on it in particular. Since Egypt and the IMF agreed to structural adjustment policies in 1991, it has moved towards a market economy including privatizing state-run enterprises. This is a process that further accelerated upon entering the 2000s and rising barons who benefited from the move to a market economy and gained power were elected to parliament, also gaining political authority, thus it became a situation called parasitic capitalism, or crony capitalism. By making these rising entrepreneurs aides to his second son, Gamal, who had a key post in the ruling party, Mubarak tried to simultaneously achieve rapid and efficient economic development and transfer the presidency to his son. However, with the public's growing dissatisfaction towards elements that had accumulated before the collapse such as corruption, a nepotistic society, an authoritarian administration and the oppression of the security police, the Mubarak administration fell. As the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions were the results of a failure to move to market economies, I think the creation of a future national framework will probably attract a lot of attention. That is my first thought.

The second is the idea of "justice" (*adāla*) that the Arabic people sought. In Cairo's Tahrir Square, where protestors stationed themselves, what was often seen on the placards that Egyptians held up were the words "social justice." What protests not only in Egypt but in all the Arab nations had in common were the words "social justice." I asked many people in Egypt after the revolution what the origin of the social justice they were seeking was and some said ancient Egypt, and some said it originated in Islam. I don't know what the definite answer to where this idea sprouted from is, but it may be the key to understanding the chain of political changes.

(Shiraishi) How about you, Mr. Fukuda?

(Fukuda) It is very difficult to reach a firm conclusion on the Arab upheaval at the present stage. The Arab upheaval has a variety of elements, common elements to all the nations or characteristic elements to a nation, making an assessment at the current stage difficult. For example, the Iranian Revolution in 1979 was driven by a range of forces from the Shiites to communists. Ultimately the Shiites took power and as a historical assessment, the Iranian Revolution came to be recognized as the Islamic Revolution.

Thus, to accurately assess the Arab upheaval, it may be necessary to assess it in light of the new trend of the Middle East. There will be elections in Tunisia in October and elections will also be held in Egypt in November.

It also seems that the situation in Libya will soon reach some kind of resolution. So, soon we may be able to see its direction and trend.

Here Judging by the current situation, I believe that, as a result of the elections in Tunisia and Egypt, it does appear that Islam will gain strong influence, though I do not believe that Islamic elements will gain overwhelming power enough to turn them into so-called Islamic state. Then if civil war in Libya end, a domestic power struggle may ensue. I think the strongest in that power struggle is probably the power with the Islamic force. In the course of things, the influence of Islam will strengthen more and more.

In the context in which the Arab upheaval occurred, there is opposition to heavy-handed politics and dissatisfaction towards the economy and society. Looking at it from an Islamic view point, the authoritarianism in countries like Egypt was not simply authoritarianism, but it was an authoritarianism linked to the US. Also it seems that economic reforms under globalism centering on America has caused a range of economic and social problems such as a gap between rich and poor.

trends in the Middle East, I think that maybe the countries in the region as a whole will keep more distances from the US and such trends will also occur in each country. We have to watch the situation carefully for a bit longer, but in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya in North Africa at least I think such movements will occur.

(Shiraishi) Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> This is the first part of the following article: “An Insight into the Political Changes in the Middle East And the Arab World,” *Ajiken World Trend*, Jan. 2012 (Original text in Japanese).