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Transcript

One Year On: The Challenges of Democratic Transition in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings

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Dr Maha Azzam:

It gives me great pleasure to be chairing today's meeting on the first anniversary of the protests in Egypt that toppled Hosni Mubarak. It is a momentous day, and people gathered in Tahrir again today in their thousands. And what was set in motion in Tunisia is reverberating throughout the region. The challenges are enormous, and we're very lucky today to have Professor Yezid Sayigh to tell us a little bit more about those challenges and to explain the situation, which is fast-changing everyday, to us.

Yezid is a senior associate at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, where his work focuses on the future political role of Arab armies, the resistance and reinvention of authoritarian regimes, and the Israeli-Palestine conflict and peace process. Previously, Yezid was professor of Middle East Studies at King's College London. From 1994 to 2003 he served as assistant director of studies of the Centre of International Studies at Cambridge University. And from 1998 to 2003 he headed the Middle East programme at the IISS, the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London.

Yezid Sayigh:

Thanks, Maha, for the introduction, and thanks to all of you for coming here this evening. I looked through the list of participants earlier just to get a sense of where you come from and what you do, and I was very pleased to see that I know almost none of you, [Laughter] which is a very good thing. It means we don't just get the usual suspects but there are other people who are interested in the region. And, unfortunately, I didn't anticipate this so I am not ready to repeat any of my old jokes, so that's about as much comedy as you'll get tonight.

Well, clearly then, as you know I'm going to be discussing the challenges to democratic transition in Arab countries and particularly those that have been effected by the uprisings, although some of my remarks may apply more broadly. And evidently the ousting of a number presidents-for-life over the past year has removed an important obstacle to democratisation, but changing authoritarian systems that have been constructed over decades is a much bigger challenge. So the initial euphoria, whether among protestors and youth movements in the region themselves, or among observers and commentators on the outside, the expectation that this is a totally new world is going to take rather longer to achieve.

I'm going to focus on a number of major challenges, with the limited time that I've got this is going to be very broad-brush and I'm just going to focus on

some of the things that strike me as particularly interesting or important. I'm going to look at political and institutional legacies, I think the legacy factor is an extremely important one here. Social strains that have arisen from and unequal development, unequal opportunity and so on, poverty, of course, and, the sort of identity politics, sectarian dynamics, ethno-nationalism et cetera that may arise from these strains in the future. Third is the structure or the mode of operation of the political economies that have been distorted by crony capitalist development over the last ten to twenty years, depending on which country we are looking at. And, finally, I'll touch on very briefly towards the end, the role of the coercive apparatus, the armed forces in particular, internal security, those agencies that are mandated by the state to employ organised violence on its part.

Looking at legacies first. As I said, in all the countries we are looking at, and if not most Arab countries, though not all, authoritarian systems have been built for periods ranging from at least thirty up to sixty years. The Egyptian case is a very obvious one, where authoritarian rule and the role of the military are synonymous with the creation of the Egyptian republic in 1952. I mean, these are entirely co-terminus trends and dynamics, and so these systems will not be thoroughly or radically changed or democratised in a short space of time; the process will be difficult, messy, at times reversible, possibly bloody, and, often, I think most often, partial.

So, what do I mean by the legacies? Well, first of all, it is important to remember the authoritarian systems tied key sectors or elite groups, the state bureaucracy, armed forces or internal security services or both, and, increasingly, big business. And so what we're talking about then are systems that penetrated their societies, their political economy, the state apparatus, culture, political attitudes, expectations, social welfare, anything you can think of, all this was shaped and oriented in accordance with the needs and dynamics of authoritarianism. We can't expect that these networks or elite alliances will simply disappear – they certainly won't. In many cases the initial response, the natural response is to try and adapt and re-invent themselves in one way or another. Other transitional situations, Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall, for instance, shows us how often those who are most adept at rising to the top of the new system, whether it is the political system or the new capitalist free-market economy, are often the same people who were powerful brokers in the old system. So, we should expect that as well in much of the Middle East.

But, at the same time, for reasons, with results that are both good and bad, we should not underestimate the reality of transition, of flux, of fluidity,

throughout the region in countries that are in transition. Everything is open to challenge, everything is open to re-negotiation. This may mean that, in some cases, those who held power, whether it is economic power, or political power, or military power, will fight all the more viciously to retain that power, precisely because everything is being challenged. They may also, equally, see opportunities to arise to expand and aggrandise what they already have. People who sit on the board, for instance, of state-owned, semi-privatised companies may now see an opportunity, if these companies become fully privatised, to become the owners of these companies, if they're in a position to manipulate that process.

But the legacy factor also goes beyond these networks of old elite alliances to include political and institutional culture, the informal rules and patterns, the social expectations regarding the way things are done. For instance, to take one example, Libya: Politics, employment patterns, economic behaviour, decision making, investment, anything to do pretty much with people's livelihood, will probably, in my view, continue to be shaped by the same patterns that were established in Libya immediately after independence, under the monarchy, and not just under Muhammad Gaddafi after 1969. This is a country in which, for pretty much its entire independent existence, some like 80% of its population was reliant directly or indirectly, to one degree or another, on state-funded enterprise and projects, salaries et cetera, ultimately all, of course, deriving from oil revenues. Why should we expect that Libyans who are now 'free' and free to do many things, do we suddenly think they don't want to replicate any of that? That they don't want the state to provide? They don't want oil to provide? I wouldn't think that is a natural and normal response.

On the contrary, this will trigger the sort of battle and fights, I think, we have seen in Iraq, where many of the new political forces, you suddenly had a wide spectrum of political forces after 2003 that emerged to contest and compete – sometimes violently – but they competed for the same sorts of things: access to state resources, patronage networks, and with the state and its power of control over these various types of assets and resources as a type of prize. That is a very old pattern in Iraqi politics of, in fact it is, you know, the pattern established from its very birth in the early 1920s.

And as I've mentioned Iraq, I'll say a little bit more about that. Although there was a radical transition in Iraq by force of war, force of American invasion, and total re-structuring top-down, with quite a few positive results – there has been a democratisation of the structure, at least, in Iraq, there have been elections, the competitions are meaningful. And, yet, some of the key features

of past Iraqi politics, including those under Saddam Hussein, are replicating themselves again now under Nouri al-Maliki. The struggle for, to control ministries, or the seat of government because of the patronage and the benefits and resources that that then allows, which, as I've said, is a very typical, long-standing pattern; or, for instance, the struggle between the centre, the capital, and the provinces, another extremely long-standing pattern of politics in Iraq. This is, once again, a key part of explaining what has been going on between Maliki and some of his rivals, some of the provinces, what the Sunnis are now demanding – they are demanding, or moving towards demanding a region – how he has operated the police, the governors he appoints, the armed forces, in a variety of different ways, to secure his control, direct, personal control over the provinces, circumventing, in many cases, the bureaucratic and political structures that were put into place since 2003 where this most serves his purpose.

I now want to move onto the social dimensions, the social dynamics and strains that also will shape where the transition goes next. To a large extent the uprisings were clearly something of a socio-economic, or, if you like, a class revolution. Middle-class youth activists in many cases were the foot soldiers. In places like Tahrir Square they were the most vocal, the most articulate, able as in, say, the April 6 movement, to shape their tactics and identify key priorities at any given moment, key slogans.

But, at the same time, of course, we also notice how, in places like Tunisia or Syria, the revolts started outside the capitals, outside the main cities, in rural areas or in provincial cities and towns. And we have to go to understanding the nature of socio-economic trends developments in each of these countries over the last decades to understand what type of revolution this has been in each case. So, what I'm saying is that the varying nature of class – whatever you want to call it, socio-economic formation, distribution of wealth – has led to different responses, I think.

In Syria, for instance, the expansion of private sector activity in rural areas from around 2002 or 2003 when neo-liberal economic reforms were introduced in a big way in Syria, this benefitted rural areas massively, and you had a new breed of rural entrepreneurs emerging in villages and towns and provincial centres. Now, from 2008, however, you had the global recession, but, more importantly in some ways also, the massive hikes in food prices and in the general consumer price index, 2008 and then 2010, and this effected much of the globe, but certainly it effected Syria like Egypt, like Tunisia, like Algeria, and I think understanding the revolution has a lot to do with understanding these sorts of coincidences.

And, of course, the increasing rapaciousness of the regime arms in the countryside where the growing wealth attracted greater attention from the security agencies and members of the party who now started to crowd local entrepreneurs. This tells us, I think, why in Syria, the revolts started partly and spread quickly in these rural areas, which had seen their income rise and their expectations rise, and then seen them drop and hit a brick wall, for a variety of reasons, not all of which were the doing of the regime.

Second, of course, there, as in Egypt, or as potentially in Algeria or Morocco or elsewhere, food prices and inflation also hit the urban poor hardest, who didn't benefit from the boom that had occurred in the countryside. Egypt is a good instance of this, where the massive privatisation of the last decade transformed the Egyptian economy, generated massive growth in overall gross domestic product and output et cetera, but most of that increase was actually concentrated in a few hands, and in a few business, in a few sectors, whereas the vast majority of Egyptians saw no increase in their livelihood, and that's partly why – I mean, it is obviously more complicated than that – but much of the Egyptian population didn't go through the boom and then bust that the Syrian population went through, so this helps us understand, I think, some of the different dynamics.

In all cases, this suggests as I indicated that we've probably witnessed very different types of revolutions, and we maybe don't quite yet see which revolution occurred in each place, and we tend to think these are the Arab uprisings, the Arab spring, the Arab revolution, and revolutions are all alike, aren't they? Well they're not all alike, by any means. So, I think we are going to continue to go through very diverse transitions and outcomes, and we should be very wary of uni-linear or teleological interpretations and assumptions about political change that is that all this is about democratisation and will lead necessarily or inevitably to further democratisation, that is not necessarily so.

And we should also be slow, therefore, to assume that apparently similar things or phenomenon, for instance, the rise of Salafi movements or parties – certainly in Egypt, where we saw how much of the vote they took in the parliamentary election, but also in Tunisia, maybe elsewhere – just because we call them Salafis, or they call themselves Salafis, doesn't make them all identical and the same thing, and their position and their role, and the reason that they rise in Tunisia, or Egypt, or in Palestine, or Jordan, or Syria, is not one and the same thing, these are not necessarily one and the same movement, and they may reflect different realities and lead to different places.

In all cases, looking ahead, demands and expectations for social justice, for opportunity, for employment, housing, and so on are going to be very hard for new democratically elected governments to meet. And this is an enormous challenge and poses enormous risks. There is a risk, for instance, of renewed social protest among the underclass, among the poorest, among the urban poor, areas that have some expectations as a result of these revolutions, but are seeing that they are not being met. And if there is another explosion it may well be a far more violent, class-based, angry, hostile, alienated one than we have seen so far. This isn't inevitable, but that is a risk, I think. Political radicalisation, again – whether we mean sort of more extreme Salafi jihadism, or other types of responses.

There is also, I think, some risk of the revival of pressure or intervention from the armed forces, where there is a residual attachment to old style social welfare or social justice slogans and discourse, the Egyptian armed forces still carry a little bit of a whiff of the [Gamal Abdel] Nasser legacy. The Tunisian armed forces were formed under [Habib] Bourguiba, and although he marginalised them they still believe in the role of the state in providing basic job security, food security et cetera, and they think that they should somehow find a way of protecting that and promoting that.

Finally, on this particular, or under this heading, social strains may intensify sectarian or ethno-national identity politics. And I'll take the example of Jordan for that, where we have seen the movement among military retirees, who are a powerful force – or, at least, they could mobilise to become a powerful force in Jordan – their movement started in a big way in 2010, and some aspects of their resentment against neo-liberal economic policies, and the perception that Palestinians dominate the upper-urban middle class, the private sector, and that they're behind these policies, has fed an anti-Palestinian sort of east-backed nationalism among them, and also among the new youth movements that have been emerging over the past year in Jordanian, in East Bank cities of the south, and centre and north. So these are, there's an irony here that these are movements that are demanding moves towards something like a constitutional monarchy, that want a more meaningful democratisation, that want an empowered parliament, which are good things, and yet this goes hand-in-hand with the perception that this is also about pushing back the Palestinians and denying them the ability to mess about with the birth-right of the native East Bankers. And I'm not saying that this is right or wrong, I'm simply pointing out how these strains may be activated and given free reign as a result of these types of pressures and the inability of authorities to meet the needs.

I'll move to the political economy. I started by saying that the way in which economies work in much of the region has been affected by cronyism, by crony capitalist development, and this has to be reversed if broad social constituencies that are supportive of democratic consolidation are to emerge and to be empowered. It is not clear, for instance, that just because there is a lot of resentment of certain big business cronies – Ahmed Ezz in Egypt, or the Hammamet Nabeul business elite around in Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia – is going to be replaced by people who believe in genuine free-market democracy, or whatever you want to call it, economic democracy.

It may well be, to the contrary, that others think 'now is our chance to do the same thing', and that's the case in Tunisia where, for instance, the [incoherent] Sousse, the big business elite, Harvard-trained and so on, want to replace the old Hammamet Nabeul elite or sub-elite. What the outcome will be may be very different of course, but I'm just pointing out that there are figures or elite groups waiting within the wings, within the big business class, at least, that may come in, and these are, after all, already plugged in some networks, in the armed forces, or in the political leadership, even the new one. And, moreover, they may benefit from US and EU expectations that these countries and their new governments maintain and deepen or expand neo-liberal economic reforms. This may or may not be a good thing to do, I'm simply pointing out how it affects political balances.

So, how does one change the highly concentrated and oligarchic nature of capital formation in a number of these countries? Turkey offers a very interesting instance of the relationship between capitalist development and democratisation, in that the decades of old-style, import-substituting industrialisation policies that were implemented across much of the third world, in Egypt as well as in Turkey, from the 1930s onwards, and decades of state-sponsored industrialisation focused on the big business sector, the capitalist big business sector in Turkey. From the 1980s under Turgut Özal in particular, and then from the 1990s with the influence of trying to integrate with the EU market, this led, among other things to the expansion and diversification of the economy, but, more specifically, to the massive growth of a new bourgeoisie, the so-called Anatolian bourgeoisie, and to the growth of the small and medium business sector. This is the sector that is often missing in Arab countries, certainly in a place like Egypt, not because the numbers aren't there, but because the opportunity to invest, and to seize market share, and to seize opportunities is critically channelled through parasitical or crony networks within the Egyptian economy, for instance, or the Tunisian one.

In other words, a transition from a Zine El Abidine Ben Ali-style or a Mubarak-style political economy isn't assured to something that we recognise as free market capitalism. That is not how it worked in Eastern Europe, where the economy was more advanced in all, pretty much all Eastern European countries, this is not necessarily going to happen. But unless that transformation happens, it is difficult to see where the constituency is that has the power and the votes to empower parliament, to empower parliamentary politics, and to help the politicians in government roll back the armed forces, for instance, in Egypt, and ensure that what Egypt moves into is genuine democracy, with maybe some reasonable compromises with the army. Or, instead, replicate what in Latin America during the 1980s and 1990s wave of democratisation led to what is sometimes called 'protected democracy' in which the armed forces maintained a range of exceptions, and immunities, and privileges that placed them above the law and beyond prosecution or accountability before civilian authorities. This is what, clearly, the Egyptian armed forces tried to do on several occasions last year through particular documents they proposed to the government in the form of super-constitutional principles, and I don't think that struggle is quite over yet.

Now, since I've mentioned the army; I'll say two quick things about the armed services, and wrap up. One is that, clearly, the armed forces in every case of...where there has been an Arab uprising, played a critical role, whether by giving the president the push in Tunisia, a bit more reluctantly in Egypt, or by neutralising themselves in Yemen, by falling apart against, for, or on the fence in Libya, or by holding firm, loyal, broadly for various reasons in Syria; in each case the balance of power was dependent, critically, on the position taken by the armed forces. Now, that doesn't tell us everything about what will come in the future, but I will suggest that renegotiating the civilian-military pact or understanding is going to be critical in every case, because we move from more or less formal or informal set of understandings that governed relations between the armed forces and a powerful president like Bashar al-Assad's father, or Hosni Mubarak, or Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, and many others.

Those sets of understandings or relationships were becoming increasingly crony relationships as well, pulling them into the patronage structure that assured their...what they wanted. This, now, is going to have to be put into text if these privileges are going to be reproduced. So, we're going to have big negotiations struggles over what goes in the constitution, because otherwise how can the armed forces be sure of maintaining any of this? They can't be sure that the next president in Egypt – even if the president is all-powerful yet again – will necessarily be their man in five years time. What I

think, really, this is about, is in all cases we are looking at societies, political parties, and various institutional groups such as the armed forces renegotiating the nature of the state in Egypt, or in Syria, or in Libya, wherever. And, so, when we renegotiate civil-military relations in these cases, when Libyans fight and shoot at each other, as is happening almost everyday now, over whether to reintegrate into a single army and under whose command, and, I assume, whether this is going to be a Benghazi commander or a Tripolitanian commander, these are actually struggles that simply mimic or reflect the wider struggle about the nature of the Libyan state, or the Egyptian state, or the Syrian state. Which takes me to the final point.

What emerges, then, from all this is a new type of question, which we didn't have before, and maybe that's the biggest change, and the most important and, hopefully, a positive change. The question is: can political parties – both Islamist and secular and the whole range of what that means – that have emerged from decades of oppression or outlawed status, in many cases, develop the maturity, the cohesion, the unity of purpose, the stamina, and the fundamental commitment to pluralism in order to achieve consensus or coalitions and unity among each other? Can they show these traits sufficiently in order to resolve the massive questions that lie ahead of resolving the nature of the state, whether to be secular or Islamist, whatever each word means; whether to pursue more status provision of economic management, or social welfare, or total free market policies; how to deal with social cleavages, whether they are ethnic, or tribal, or regional, or ethno-national, or sectarian; and, last but not least, always, how to deal with organised armed force? Who does the army belong to? East Bankers? Should Palestinians be brought in, in Jordan? Should it belong to Tripolitarians or people from the east in Libya? Sunnis in Syria? Will we still have an Alawi commanded army in Syria, ever again just based on merit?

These are struggles, just to emphasise that last point, that we actually see unfolding before our eyes, and have been unfolding, but we see them now very starkly, I think, in Iraq, which already had its transition, and this is nearly nine years later, and these are exactly the sorts of questions that bedevil Iraq's future today, and which still bring into question whether Iraq will remain a single unified country, or not. I'll stop there.