CIVIL RESISTANCE IN THE ARAB SPRING: TRIUMPHS AND DISASTERS

Book Launch and Panel Discussion

DR. TAREK MITRI, Director, Issam Fares Institute, American University of Beirut
SIR ADAM ROBERTS, Senior Research Fellow in International Relations, Oxford University
MR. EDWARD MORTIMER, Distinguished Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford University
MS. ELHAM FAKHRO, Ph.D. Candidate, St. Anthony’s College, Oxford University & Lecturer in Legal Writing and Research, New York University in Abu Dhabi
MS. HELEN LACKNER, Specialist on social movements and development
DR. MICHAEL J. WILLIS, King Mohammed VI Fellow in Moroccan and Mediterranean Studies, Oxford University

October 3, 2017
Summary by Laudy Issa

Five part-authors to “Civil Resistance in the Arab Spring: Triumphs and Disasters” discussed their respective chapters in a book launch and panel discussion hosted in collaboration with Amnesty International. Moderated by the Director of the Issam Fares Institute, Dr. Tarek Mitri, the panelists discussed the failures and victories of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings across several countries while shedding light on peaceful and violent demonstrations, power politics, and the capacity of civil resistance.

On his opening statement, Mitri credited the book as being a good reminder of the defining moments of the Arab Spring, inclusive of a brief history of non-violence and peaceful movements. He also commented on the term “Arab Spring”, considering the element of surprise and excitement that triumphed over rationality and contributed to the failure and unsustainability of the uprisings.

“What was unlikely for decades had become within reach,” said Mitri. “[...] Excitement prevailed over lucidity. Lucidity is on the losing side when we speak of the Arab Spring.”

Sir Adam Roberts, editor and part-author of the discussed book, cautioned against rushing to certain conclusions about the nature of the Arab world when considering the Arab Spring. These problematic assumptions are as follows:

1. Arab society is not suitable for democracy
2. Islam is not suitable for democracy
3. Nonviolence does not yield results
4. The revolutions and acts of resistance are part of a Western plot

Roberts also mentioned the importance of understanding the local events that occurred before and during the Arab Spring in each country. The author of the “Civil Resistance and the Fate of the Arab Spring” chapter concluded by highlighting the importance of constitutionalism.

“Sadly, when we think about civil resistance,” said Roberts. “There’s little emphasis on constitutionalism.”
Why nonviolence works in certain sociopolitical contexts and fails in others was discussed during the panel by journalist Edward Mortimer, co-author of the opening chapter of the book alongside international lawyer Chibli Mallat.

According to Mortimer, the question of when to use violence or nonviolence comes down to tactics and strategy. Despite the effectivity of the initial stages of the Arab uprisings, the lack of long-term strategy resulted in the failure of these movements as opposed to, for example, the successful civil disobedience movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. The importance of long-term tactics also emerges when we consider the countertactics used by regimes, including the appropriation of the essence of civil resistance: human relation.

“\textit{If you don’t have an idea of what to do next}, said Mortimer, “\textit{that’s often a recipe for disaster.}”

“\textit{If you don’t have an idea of what to do next},” said Mortimer, “\textit{that’s often a recipe for disaster.}” Elham Fakhro considered the history of the 2011 movement in Bahrain, which she is often asked about. Several themes stand out when discussing Bahrain: the use of violence as a state response to civilians, mobilization having come from multiple sources including both grassroot youth and well-established movements, the role of state media in disputing the opposition, and the interference of external powers.

Fakhro discussed the extent of state crackdown on civil society following the initial uprisings, and the role of dialogue as a potential way out.

Yemen witnessed a partially successful uprising, according to Helen Lackner. The Yemeni movement started out as being nonviolent in 2011, changing after an unnamed gunman shot and killed 30 demonstrators in March and the official opposition to the regime joined the revolution and influenced its strategies.

Lackner believes the movement was effective in showing citizens that alternatives to oppressive regimes exist and that social change requires long-term efforts.

“The movement has sowed seeds for future change,” said Lackner.

The final panelist, Dr. Michael J. Willis, explained why certain nonviolent movements succeed but others fail. Both Tunis and Morocco witnessed nonviolent forms of protest, but the prior managed to successfully oust Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali while the latter did not achieve its objectives.

Willis considered the power politics at play in both countries and discussed the state response to the nonviolent protests. As opposed to Tunis, the Moroccan regime’s response was well-organized and utilized a variety of methods such as the use of propaganda, “fake news” and police arrests to maintain control.

Agreeing with Lackner, Willis believes that the movement in Morocco splintered the sense of fatalism that existed in the country prior to the 2011 events, planting the roots of hope for change. The Middle East Research Director of Amnesty International, Lynn Maalouf, mentioned how refreshing it was to read a book that allows readers to take a step back and critically understand the situation of the Arab Spring. Maalouf also highlighted the difficulties that Amnesty International faces “in the bowel of things” and how their efforts in the Arab world have lost momentum and no longer elicit the support of the international community.