

PM Fuad Siniora Speech

School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS)

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Dean Einhorn

Dear Students and Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

I would like to thank you all for coming here this evening, and I would like to thank SAIS, and Dean Einhorn for providing this platform for me to speak with you tonight, openly, at times that are truly dramatic and historic in our region.

Regimes that ruled for decades collapsed in days, and populations that seemed to live a life of resignation and acceptance, revolted in hours. The winds of change that passed through South-East Asia and Eastern and Central Europe in the eighties and nineties have now arrived to our region, ending what has been known as “the Arab exception”.

I would like to focus my talk on addressing two questions that lay down the issues as I see them, and hopefully open the door for a lively discussion:

The first question concerns the forces that are driving the most significant change in the modern history of the Arab states at least since their independence. These forces were obviously so powerful that they brought down in days walls of silence and fear that were built, brick by brick, over decades, turning around the situation from populations that were terrified of their rulers to rulers that are terrified

of their populations. Yet, such forces that were not that evident, since many of us, in the East and in the West, including the US and especially those involved in the region, didn't see these events coming, and coming that quickly and strongly.

The second question concerns our responsibility, i.e. those who share common values and believe in responsible democracy and openness, and also what the West, and in particular the US, can and must do for their own interest, on one hand, and to help the Arab dream of a better more dignified life turn into a reality and avert the turning of the Arab Spring into a long and harsh winter, on the other hand.

On the first question, I will focus my talk along three angles: Political, economic and cultural in order to show how the long perceived stability of the Arab world has been in fact enshrined in myths, limitations, and exaggerations.

One- The Political angle or the myth of political stability

Arab countries have always portrayed an image of stability. In fact, high ranked American officials often described them as such. Regimes at the helm for decades managed through iron fists and emergency laws to navigate the muddy waters of the Middle East, where on one hand the Arab-Israeli conflict cast a constant shadow, and the failure to find a solution to this conflict provided both a reason and a pretext for many countries to putting off political, economic and social reforms through the use of the famous pan-Arab slogan "no voice should be louder than that of the battle against Israel". On the other hand, the threat of Islamist movements, looming everywhere in the Arab world, and breeding at the various frustrations with the regimes.

Between the threats of the Israelis and that of the Islamists, and often both, Arab societies were at large obliged and forced to accept what

was presented to them as a “fair” bargain: i.e. limits on personal and political freedoms in exchange for the stability that is so dear to them as well.

The bargain seemed even more appealing when considering recent Arab democracies. In Iraq, a foreign-grown model imposed by force caused the country to descend into an ugly and truly frightening religious and sectarian conflict. And in the West-Bank and Gaza, two different governments emerged to run a Palestinian State that has yet to be born.

In this context, let me also say a couple of words about Lebanon, my country, and the oldest and for a very long time the only democracy in the Middle East. The country has paid the price of its openness, and has been used as a field for settling scores, rather than celebrated as an oasis of diversity: it has paid over the course of four decades the price of the struggle between the Americans and the Soviets, the Arabs and the Israelis, the Syrians and the Iraqis, the Americans and the Iranians, and the Iranians and the Arabs. All these amounted to a civil war that started in 1975, six Israeli invasions since then, and so many shocks and assassinations that have aimed at shaking the foundations of the Lebanese State, which remained steadfast, albeit significantly bruised and weakened.

A brief Lebanese Spring blossomed in 2005; indeed, some international observers have argued that “the Arab awakening began not in Tunisia this year, but in Lebanon in 2005 when, appalled by the assassination of ex-prime minister Rafic Hariri, the man credited with rebuilding the country after the civil war, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese of all faiths and social background gathered in central Beirut to demand the withdrawal of Syria’s 20,000 soldiers in the country, and to demand Justice, freedom and independence and sovereignty. That was the first ousting of a dictator, Robert Fisk

noticed in a recent article in the “Independent”, albeit from someone else’s country.

Sadly, the Spring of Beirut lasted only briefly, and since then, the reactionary forces left no means to reclaim their position, often through the use of arms in domestic political disputes, and always under the excuse of fighting Israel. This has not only exposed Lebanon again to the seismic sectarian and political divisions in the region, but it has also transformed the country from a model of participation and inclusion to a model of both paralysis and tension.

Now imagine, a year ago, a hard-working, average-income Arab family, gathering around the TV after a long day of work, and watching on Arab Satellite Networks, news and images of sectarian conflicts, suicide bombings in mosques and souks, political divisions and bickering, and governments that take months to be formed in Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine, i.e. the three most democratic societies of the Middle East, and in principle the “model” for other Arab countries to adopt; and then compare all that with the security that you could so once feel on the streets of Damascus, Cairo, or Tunis. Could the choice be more obvious? Wouldn’t freedom look like a reasonable price to pay for life itself?

What happened then? How has the bargain gotten to become unappealing, so suddenly, so abruptly?

What happened was the accumulation of frustrations from the lack of freedom, and justice, combined with a sense of defeat and a strong longing to live a life of dignity and join the train of global progress and development, as well as unmet expectations of economic development, are all factors that caused a straw to break the back of the camel, when Mohammad Bu Azizi, a young Tunisian street vendor, set himself on fire on December 17, 2010, and set with him, what turned out to be paper tigers of stability.

An orphan who struggled to support his ailing mother, and pay the university tuition of his sister, hoping that she accomplishes an education that eluded him, had his cart of vegetables confiscated, after he had gotten a loan of \$200 to get it, and then was humiliated by an officer and her aides. When his attempts to see the Governor were declined and his dignity reduced, he set himself on fire nearby the Governor's office, sparking a wave of demonstrations first in Tunisia and then Algeria, Egypt, and later Yemen, before it spread to other countries.

What happened then was a mistake from the part of the authorities. A crystal clear mistake in the era of mobile phones, YouTube, Facebook and satellite TV: They opened fire, leading to the explosion of anger accumulated over years and decades from brutal regimes that were at the same time perceived as “puppets” of the West and incapable of standing up to Israel, though these regimes tried to build their legitimacy on doing so.

Ladies and gentlemen:

Almost the exact chain of actions and reactions took place in various countries across the Arab world, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Gulf: spontaneous demonstrations expressing anger and frustration at acts that violated basic aspects of human dignity, countered by an immediate and harsh over-reaction from the side of the police and security forces; leading to more deaths and more frustrations as videos of excessive violence widely circulated on YouTube; leading regimes to claim that a “foreign conspiracy”, “a third party”, typically either Israel, western powers, or even Al-Qaeda, has entered the scene to “destabilize” their countries and cause a “sedition” among their people; leading to even more frustration and escalation of protests because the people know exactly who shot at them in cold blood; then a clear message from the leader at the top: it

is either preserving the regime or else religious, sectarian and ethnic chaos. It is either the “ruling family” and its cronies, or chaos and the end of the cherished stability.

And then raises the evident question: what stability?

Allow me to quote the exact words of a brave young Arab who wrote in the New York Times recently, which in fact applies to many countries in the region. He wrote, Quote “the country has degenerated into chaos and bloodshed so quickly in these past few weeks that I keep thinking: was our stability, our distinguishing characteristic, ever even true? The government tells us that if the regime falls, the country could devolve into sectarian chaos. Perhaps that is so. But what did the ruling party- the leader of our state and society, according to the Constitution- accomplish over the last 48 years if that is so?” Unquote.

I think it is all simply said here. There goes the myth of stability as it turned out only to mean the stability of the regime. The wall of fear, not just from the ruler, but from an assumed future of chaos in case the regime falls, has collapsed; and this false bargain does not seem that appealing anymore.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I turn now to the second angle of my answer: the economic angle and the limitations of the macro reforms.

In addition to freedoms, at the heart of Arab revolutions, at the heart of Bu Azizi act of revolt, lies a fundamental need: jobs, and the quest for decent work that provides a decent and dignified life and the hope of a better tomorrow. Undergoing a demographic revolution that is set to increase the labor force from 100 million in 2007 to around 160 million by the end of this decade, it is no surprise that the people that

answered first Bu Azizi's call across the Arab World are the unemployed youth, often the educated ones and from all regions and social classes.

Now truth be told, there were many efforts that were undertaken over the last two decades in the Arab world to stabilize the macro-framework, through macro reforms: fiscal deficits were brought under control, and so were the current account and inflation.

But stabilization did not necessarily mean deep structural reforms that are rendering the market more competitive and therefore more attractive to investment and to the creation of job opportunities. The reasonable growth rates did not "trickle down" to guarantee more inclusion; they did not widely increase the number of stakeholders, people who have an interest in the stability of the system. I am talking as an ex-banker, and an ex-minister of finance, and not only as a politician when I assert to you that only an equitable growth can be a sustainable growth.

The undertaken privatization projects never represented a real liberalization, as they meant the sale of State assets to favored businessmen, without rendering the sold sectors more liberal in the real economic sense of the word (i.e. lower cost and better service).

An important point to highlight here is the absence of good governance, the absence of transparency and disclosure, and the role that the perception of corruption plays in generating frustrations that exacerbate further the un-met expectations. No wonder the issues of corruption and the immense wealth of the few that are associated with the regimes, were issues at the frontline of these revolutions that named, by person, the centers of the economic power, names that used to be only whispered with fear until very recently.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I turn now to the third angle- the cultural angle and the exaggeration of cultural particularity.

When the Tunisian regime fell and the Egyptian revolt erupted, President Mubarak announced: Egypt is not Tunisia. When the Mubarak regime collapsed, both Colonel Gaddafi and his son announced that Libya is neither Tunisia nor Egypt. Recently President Assad of Syria also announced, confidently, that Syria is neither Libya, nor Tunisia, nor Egypt. Even some Chinese officials have reportedly said that China is not the Middle East. And God knows who will claim next to be different.

Well of course, no two countries are alike. And of course each national and local culture has its particularities. But increasingly, and surely with the help of technology and social networks, a universal global culture is gathering immense momentum.

This is proving to be increasingly relevant in a world that is integrated through a network, and in a global village where your “friends” are pages that know no geographical or cultural boundaries. And in this context, Freedom is the new “cultural flu” traveling through the Arab world.

Now surely Yemen is not like Syria, and Syria is not like Libya, and Libya is not like Egypt, and Egypt is not like Tunisia. That is true. But also true that in all these countries, the rulers grew older and richer, while their people grew younger and poorer. A generation gap combined with a wealth gap, increasingly separated the people from who, in principle, represented them.

I have read once that one of the important criteria in American elections is the extent to which the American people identify with a certain candidate. It is no puzzle then why many Americans would

make history and elect the junior African-American Senator from Illinois as their President: someone they could surely identify with as a self-made, technology-savvy, and optimist young man. Of course many Arab leaders are self-made, but surely not their sons, which were the Presidents-in-waiting, and surely not in a way that most Arabs identify with.

The Arab regimes and the Arab leaders at their head, by widening the gulf of separation with their people, and by tightening further and further the circle of inclusion, have stopped resembling to their people and started looking more and more as islands by themselves. How many of you had exactly this feeling when you saw Arab leaders on Satellite networks or on YouTube: the feeling of observing islands that have long lost contact with the realities of the motherland.

But these were exactly the leaders that the West and the US called “moderates”, readily classifying Arabs as “moderates” or “non-moderates”, based almost solely on the position regarding Israel. This terminology has resonated negatively with the wide Arab society, because moderates have come to be perceived as puppets of the West, which often played directly in the hand of the non-moderates. This is a concept that needs to be shattered completely: we don’t have moderates and non-moderates, we have legitimate and non-legitimate. And legitimacy is provided by the people, through the democratic tools, and this legitimacy will necessarily mean moderation, because as amply proven in Tahrir square, these brave young men and women are not anti-West and anti-US, and they are not particularly advocates of political Islam; they are just young men and women that are eager to have their voices heard, that are eager to participate in the global quest to progress and development; that are eager to live in dignity without being labeled or classified. These brave young men and women deserve much more than a label that is bestowed by the West

and by the US based on the recommendation of a lobby somewhere on K Street.

As Arab leaders who believe in democracy, our vision and our political discourse need to be crystal clear: our desire is to adopt the necessary reforms, to embrace the global culture while preserving our characteristics. And in the end of the day, democracy and free elections that guarantee the succession of power will also guarantee the system to self-correct and converge towards more moderation and more openness that does reflect the human nature and that is, i.e. moderation, both real and sustainable.

Dear friends,

This is a good time to turn to the second question of my talk: what can the West, and in particular the US, do now?

Allow me also to tackle the answer through three aspects: the economic, the cultural and the political. I will cover the first two fairly quickly and focus a bit more on the third.

At the economic level, it is clear by now that a whole new approach needs to be developed to Western and American financial support to the region. Financial assistance needs to be coupled with mandatory transfer of know-how and assistance that empowers the institutional rather than just the macroeconomic framework, and that empowers the civil society rather than just the civil service, and that tackles openly issues of corruption, governance and the independence of the judiciary.

In a world where no nation is really immune to what is happening in other nations, it is crucial for the West and the US to stop looking at the Middle East as a big barrel of oil supply, and start looking at it as a potential partner in global growth and development. It is important

for it to stop looking at its people as potential jihadists, and start looking at them as neighbors in this global village, neighbors that are longing to participate and contribute to global progress and development; and to consider any investment in their progress and development as an indirect investment in their own progress and development, just like any neighborhood policy would dictate.

Culturally, it is important to put a quick end to the worryingly growing Islamo-phobia, in Europe as well as in the US.

I am truly disturbed when I listen late at night to some American TV programs, read certain articles, or look at the latest polls of upcoming French elections. Can anyone explain to me where is the wisdom in behaving as if one fifth of the world's population, the fastest-growing one fifth, is your enemy? Where is the wisdom in reinventing ideological thought patterns, spreading essentialist perceptions and thus inviting Muslim counter-parts to engage in a "clash" of ignorance.

I am not going to lecture about Islam; this is neither the time nor the forum, and I am not the right person to do so.

But that is not the point. The reality is that much of what is said about Islam or done in the name of Islam is less religiously motivated than politically driven. Region-specific realities and attitudes are marked by the sense of a beleaguered identity.

And here, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I will move now to the third and most important point regarding the political aspect of Western and American contribution to help support the Arab Spring: imposing, urgently, a just and final solution to one of the oldest and deepest remaining problems in the world and which, in

fact, is somehow connected to all other problems in the Middle East: the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

I was perplexed by articles by prominent American journalists claiming that the fact that the question of Palestine has hardly come up during the Arab Spring, means that Arab youth do not care about the Palestinian issue or at least it is not the central issue in the Arab world as it has always been claimed.

I find it truly disappointing the extent of which many in the West still don't get it. Even many among those who supposedly understand the region, and write about it, still don't get it. Let me state as clearly as possible, and as comprehensively proven through opinion polls, studies, cultural and artistic productions, that the Palestinian problem remains a central issue, not just for the Middle East; it is also the key to unlocking many of the locks that separates the hearts and minds of Arabs and Muslims around the world from the West. Its solution is an essential hammer to destroy the wall of psychological separation between East and West.

In addition, an unresolved Palestinian problem is a cause that is hijacked by the extremists, by the fundamentalists, who would not hesitate to use whatever arguments they have, to ride the new wave of democracy and try to capture power in the name of fighting Israel and the West. The statement of the Iranian supreme-leader of a new anti-Western Islamic Middle East born out of the Arab Spring does not need any interpretation. This, my friends, would be the beginning of a long and dark Arab winter.

And here I would like to say a couple of words about the growing influence that has been exercised by the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran, who sneaked into the Arab world and entered Arab societies carrying the Islamic and the Palestinian flags, taking advantage of the void created by since the eighties by the Egyptian withdrawing and introversion. However, what Iran effectively did was

mostly to increase sectarian tensions in Lebanon, Gaza, and Iraq; Thus creating troubles in the name of the Palestinian cause while in the end their main objective is the “exportation of the Islamic revolution” and to foster the emergence of Iran as a regional nuclear superpower. The irony here is that the leaders of the Islamic Republic attempt to patronize the freedom revolutions of the Arab World when they are brutally putting down and prosecuting any pro-democracy and freedom voices inside Iran, as we have seen during the green revolution. Besides, the Islamic Republic of Iran is neither a model of democracy, nor of economic progress and development for the emerging democracies of the Arab world.

An unresolved Palestinian problem risks therefore throwing an already boiling region into more populism. And populism is a slippery slope towards more polarization, and radicalism – as we have clearly witnessed in previous periods of transition in Europe. And this slope will in turn widen further the separation of the East from the values of moderation and openness, leading to a build-up of violence and risk of conflict; a risk that is not just contained to the Middle East but also spreading beyond, as we saw, to the streets of Madrid and Berlin and London and Washington DC and other places.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The leaks by Al-Jazeera of the concessions that were presented by the Palestinian authority have completely rebutted the Israeli argument that there is no « reliable » Palestinian partner when it comes to peace. It was also a serious blow to the image of the US as an honest broker, constantly blaming the Palestinian for lack of « courageous » steps.

The blow to the American image was further compounded by the last US veto of a UN Security Council Resolution that condemns the continuation of building new Israeli settlements in the West Bank and

Eastern Jerusalem, even along expressions that were previously used by the administration itself. It just showed bluntly, to which extent American policy regarding Palestine is hostage to the power of the Israeli lobby in Washington DC. Even some of the Israeli press was surprised! It is bolder than the American press when it comes to Israel, with some Israeli journalists arguing recently that the position of Israel as the last «occupying state» will become much more difficult in light of the transformation that the Arab world is witnessing.

The United States has a leading role in enforcing a global solution that is not held hostage by forces of extremism on either side. The US administration has a primary responsibility in enforcing a solution along the parameters that are already known, through the Arab peace initiative (which proposes a comprehensive and sustainable peace to Israel with all Arab and Islamic States in return for a Palestinian State within the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its Capital), or even the most recent Israeli initiative put forward by a group of ex-Israeli officials including heads of the security agencies, and which endorses the Arab statement that “a military solution to the conflict will not achieve peace or provide security for the parties”.

The first freely conducted poll in Egypt published recently should send clear messages to Israel and the West: though only 31% of Egyptians feel sympathetic towards the Muslim currents, 54% of Egyptians support canceling the Camp David Peace Treaty with Israel, while only 36% supported it. 79% were unsatisfied with the American administration and 69% said they don't trust President Obama, whose speech in Cairo was only a while ago, a source of great support.

These polls reflect the problem that the West and Israel face with Arab public opinion, and unless a realization that only a fair and

comprehensive peace can be a sustainable peace, then this problem is only going to worsen.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

President Obama said in a Speech on Libya and I quote “Born, as we are, out of a revolution by those who longed to be free, we welcome the fact that history is on the move in the Middle East and North Africa, and that young people are leading the way. Because wherever people long to be free, they will find a friend in the United States. Ultimately, it is that faith - those ideals - that are the true measure of American leadership.” Unquote.

Principles such as this, my friends, cannot but be universal. And what applies to those people, should also apply to the Palestinians, the last people on earth under occupation.

I couldn't agree more with President Obama when he says: quote “We have done so because we know that our own future is safer and brighter if more of mankind can live with the bright light of freedom and dignity” unquote.

So let me stress one thing last: we urge you, and I mean by you the Western world; to stand up to your own values. It is also in your interest that we, the Arabs and Muslims who long for freedom and dignity win our cause. And if we don't win this battle, God help us all, and I mean all.

The elimination of Ben Laden is a great achievement, to the United States and to humanity. But we would be naïve to think it is the end of terrorism. In addition to the targeted military operation, a diplomatic operation is needed on the Arab-Israeli front in order to eliminate one the important pretext used by the like of Ben Laden, who use the suffering of the Palestinian people as a hiring ground. This is an

opportunity for the US, to push forward, and from a position of strength, towards addressing pertinent issues, and achieving peace and justice.

So my friends,

The journey is long. It will not be easy. But the future depends on our bold and decisive actions. It is up to us, as intellectuals and officials, or whichever influential position we hold, to lead the way, searching for the common denominator in our future.

I thank you for your attention this evening, and I am looking forward to a lively and engaging discussion.

Fuad Siniora