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Managing Transitions in the Arab World

JUNE 2012

The International Peace Institute (IPI) convened its seventeenth New York Seminar on “Managing Transitions in the Arab World” at West Point from April 18–20, 2012. The seminar is an annual event designed to foster professional development and informal policy discussions among mid-career diplomats at the United Nations, focusing on a different topic each year.

The 2012 IPI New York Seminar examined the recent political transitions that have taken place across the Arab world, with special attention given to Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. It also featured a comparative discussion on democratic transitions to place the events in the Middle East and North Africa within a framework of similar transitions in different geographic locations. It concluded with a round of negotiation simulations and a session on the tools, strategies, and philosophy behind multilateral negotiations.

This meeting note was drafted by Nur Laiq, senior policy analyst at IPI, with input from Jose Vericat, adviser at IPI. It reflects the *rapporteur’s* interpretation of the seminar discussion and not necessarily the views of all other participants. The meeting was convened under the Chatham House rule of nonattribution.

IPI owes a debt of gratitude to the governments of Finland, Norway, and Sweden for their generous support, which make seminars and publications like this possible.

Following the International Peace Institute’s seventeenth annual New York Seminar in April 2012, this meeting note explores the transitions taking place across the Middle East and North Africa and how they can best be managed. The first section examines the changes taking place in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Libya, and Syria as the political landscape of the region is redefined. The second section then highlights comparative perspectives from democratic transitions in other parts of the world. Finally, the note looks at tools for addressing the challenges that transitions can raise, focusing in particular on multiparty negotiations and mediation.

Bread, Freedom, and Transitions in the Arab World

The uprisings taking place across the Arab world have a common identity and a unifying slogan—the fight for dignity, expressed as a demand for “bread and freedom.” Yet the revolutions also need to be viewed in the plural, for each one is different.

EGYPT

Egypt continues to wrestle with the challenges of transition. It has had a popular uprising but has not witnessed a systemic change in the regime. It remains to be seen whether it will continue down the bumpy road of transition or return to the old regime with just a change of its chief executive officers. The old centers of power are still in place and consist of select circles of businessmen, the military, and the state security apparatus, each competing for dominance. The new centers of power that have emerged include the Islamists. Commentators tend to focus on the power dynamic between the people and the regime, but participants at the seminar highlighted the centrality of the interplay among all the new and old power brokers.

The transition itself is not based on clearly defined parameters or rules that govern the process. The military, which is perceived by most as an opaque body, is setting the pace and issuing edicts while the institutions of the state remain weak and sclerotic. The new powers and the people of Tahrir remain unable to form a united front. As Egypt meanders through this process, the economy is experiencing a downturn and presenting a cause for concern. Participants suggested that Egypt’s foreign reserves are dwindling, the currency may be heading toward devaluation, and tourism revenues have decreased significantly. Participants agreed that the outcome of the revolution remains shaky. A president will be elected, but his power remains undefined and will have to be fought for within the constitution. The balance of power

seems to be tilting back toward the forces of the old regime and toward the military. However, the Muslim Brotherhood has emerged as a powerful force that cannot be dismissed.

TUNISIA

Tunisia has witnessed a more complete revolution with palpable dividends one year on. Most of these are human rights related. Many international conventions have been signed by the new government, including the *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*. A general amnesty has been declared and prisoners have been released. Freedom of expression and the right of assembly are now respected, and political parties are flourishing. The ruling Ennahda party has settled on a constitution that implies a separation of *sharia* and the state. The political system has seen more of a wholesale exchange of power from old elites to new, but the need for social justice still prevails. One of the biggest problems facing Tunisia relates to the economy—to stimulating investment and generating jobs. The international community has concentrated its attention on the political aspects of the revolution, but seminar discussions also highlighted the need for international actors to engage with issues of social and economic justice.

YEMEN

Yemen continues to deal with political strife, even with the departure of President Saleh. The centers of power in Yemen are divided between the old guard, the insurgent Houthis, and the secessionist movement in the south, who are all entangled in a battle for the reins of power. The first phase of the transition was marked by a Gulf Cooperation Council initiative that sent a strong message regarding the political will of all parties involved and their desire to engage in a political process. The show of unity by the international community made a huge difference in terms of the pressure felt by the former Yemeni president. The next phase will determine whether the National Dialogue process, the crafting of a new constitution, and national elections can be carried out in an inclusive way.

Seminar participants suggested that the National Dialogue provides room for optimism but also poses many challenges relating to its participants. What factors determine their participation? What and who do they represent? What is the role of civil

society and of external actors? What role can internal mediation play? Yemen also faces the problem of high unemployment rates, secession, and a Houthi rebellion. It is within this context that the main actors need to arrive at a negotiated political solution.

LIBYA

The intervention in Libya continues to be a topic of debate, and it provoked a number of questions during the meeting. How did the situation in Libya unravel, and was the NATO bombing campaign a failure of mediation? Could the UN have played a greater role? Were any of the parties involved seeking a peaceful negotiated solution? The UN envoy and the AU both presented options and road maps. But were the forces with the real economic, political, and military power within Libya and internationally looking for a solution or for regime change? And even within that context, could more have been done in terms of finding a negotiated solution? The role of international actors and of regional organizations in Libya remains a subject worthy of further examination.

Of course, the internal context of the country also plays a significant role in structuring Libya's future. The domestic political situation remains precarious. And participants stressed that it is important not to overlook the fact that strong state institutions are lacking in Libya. The power of the central government is severely curtailed by old frictions, including regional ones that have resurfaced and are calling into question the integrity of the state. Different militias have also prevented the full revival of state institutions.

The impact of events in Libya continues to reverberate through the international community, making some players more cautious about questions of military intervention and civil-military coordination in other cases—such as that of Syria.

SYRIA

Syria is caught in a stalemate in which the regime is unable to defeat the opposition and the opposition is unable to topple the regime. The principal goal of the international community is to establish a ceasefire that lasts. The prevailing opinion within the international community is to rely on diplomatic instruments, such as joint envoy Kofi Annan's peace plan. But some participants stressed the importance of anticipating a situation where the

proposed ceasefire completely fails. In this case, would intervention be deemed necessary to prevent a further humanitarian crisis? In such a situation, would there be a humanitarian corridor established along the border with Turkey or Jordan, or would arms be provided to the opposition? If the international community has to go that far, it should also consider whether and how these options could further escalate conflict.

It is impossible to predict if or when the Syrian regime will fall, but if it does, how can the international community play a more constructive role in aiding the transition to a more accountable government? Some seminar participants suggested that the international community can learn from experiences in Bosnia and Kosovo, where local ownership was an essential part of the process of building and implementing transitional justice, the rule of law, and security-sector reform. They advised that the primary focus of all activities in such sectors should be on making them more accountable to the people.

Global Comparative Perspectives on Democratic Transitions

A comparative perspective on democratic transitions was also discussed at the seminar. One participant noted that despite previous predictions to the contrary, democracy can, in fact, arise in a variety of settings. Democracy is not made by pro-democracy activists, the participant suggested, but by having actors buy into and abide by a set of rules. It is therefore imperative to bring people to the political table, where they are required to play by these rules.

The participant identified many lessons learned from transitions to democracy in Central America and South East Asia, as outlined here. First, uncertainty is one of the main features of transitions to democracy. Transitions are by definition difficult to manage and do not follow a straightforward set of rules. And while it has often been argued that certain structural conditions need to be fulfilled in order for democracy to develop, such as

the presence of bourgeois, middle, and working classes or a certain religion, these have now been turned on their head. Take, for example, previous arguments that Latin America couldn't be democratic because it was Catholic or the claim that democracy requires a country to enjoy a certain level of wealth. Latin America has since experienced a wave of democratization, and it has now been proven that a country's level of economic development is not a good predictor for democratization or transitions.¹

There are, however, certain conditions that impede the process of democratization. A state that is facing an armed rebellion or that is not politically unified, because it is threatened by a secessionist movement, will find it hard to develop a democracy. This raises problems for Libya and Yemen in particular as they struggle to maintain territorial integrity.

Another challenge is the resource curse, also known as the paradox of plenty, which argues that there is a lower possibility of building a democracy in a state whose revenues depend on the export of oil. This is in part because such a setup frequently establishes patronage networks and fails to make the governing powers accountable to their citizens through taxation. It also creates the capacity for a powerful security apparatus. This produces the semblance of a strong and efficient state that is actually hollow beneath the surface, which makes transitions harder.

In addition, certain factors are thought to make the democratization process more likely. For example, the mantra of "location, location, location"—the essence of geographical determinism—has now taken on greater importance. More than any other single factor thought to influence whether a country becomes democratic is whether its neighbors become democratic.

The participant further identified three transition types: imposed transitions, reformist transitions, and transitions produced by war. The reformist model, as opposed to the imposed transition, offers a greater degree of participation to citizens. This type of transition offers the greatest opportunity for the advancement of human rights and the

¹ For a classic study of transitions to democracy see Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

promotion of social and economic justice. It is also the least common, though Tunisia provides one example. The war transition, like the one provoked by the invasion of Iraq in 2003, may lead to an electoral democracy, but it is likely to be hampered by the presence of violent nonstate actors.

Finally, much emphasis is placed on the relevance of constitutions for democratization; however, the real benefit associated with these foundational texts is not their mere existence but the process through which they are drafted. This suggests that the text itself is less important than the practice of achieving negotiated solutions. Negotiations in general, and arriving at a negotiated social contract between all parties in particular, are a key element in constructing a transition that lasts. At the same time, provisional arrangements can lead to positive or negative outcomes: these arrangements have a tendency to become permanent, meaning that the kind of rules that are negotiated during the transitional phase matter.

Multiparty Negotiations, Tools, and Strategies

The seminar included a negotiation simulation in which participants took part in efforts to effectively manage a hypothetical high-stakes conflict with national and international implications. The scenario revolved around a border dispute, requiring participants to hammer out a ceasefire agreement with the help of a mediator and negotiate a solution to the crisis.

The aim of this practical negotiation exercise was to add to the participants' knowledge of political transitions. As power relations shift and political formations evolve in the Arab world, one of the key challenges will be determining how to consolidate inclusive, sustainable, and comprehensive political agreements on the exercise and distribution of power. Negotiations will be needed at an intrastate level to consolidate contrasting priorities, values, and views of different groups in order to arrive at an agreement on political, judicial, and economic reforms. Negotiations will also be needed at regional and international levels in order to form strategic alliances, build coalitions among new actors, and develop political, military, and economic partnerships. With these challenges in mind, the simulation sought to stimulate thinking

on the dilemmas faced by negotiators and mediators as they attempt to bridge diverging views and come to political agreements.

One seminar participant outlined multiple lessons learned from the negotiations. First, good preparation is fundamental to successful negotiations. And the focus should remain on interests and not positions—i.e., on trying to present creative options using an interest-based bargaining method. Appeals to common interests have an extraordinary power to transcend factional differences. It is also important to look for ways to intentionally understand the other side and empathize with them. The better one can truly understand where the other side is coming from, the more it opens up possibilities. Similarly, the seminar participant emphasized that careful listening and active listening are crucial. The more people feel listened to or heard, the more they will tend to buy in. In addition, when trust is an issue, one needs to seek a variety of ways to build and reinforce it. To this end, it is important to look for objective criteria to show that a deal is fair.

The participant suggested that offers should be tested for “time bombs” by asking “what if” questions. These should test whether the deal has problems in it and if it can stand the test of time—even if that undermines the agreement. If this is the case, perhaps it is an agreement that needs to be undermined. It is further necessary to consider both sides' hawks and doves and the internal politics of each side; to discern more deeply the domestic constituents of both sides; to think about what kind of coalition one's counterpart can build, which fosters their ability to keep the hawks at bay, and what one can do to help them with this. At the same time, it is important to consider ways for the other side to save face—to bring the other side to their senses, not to their knees.

A mediator plays a slightly different role from a negotiator attached to a party, the speaker explained, and their main skill is essentially to set the rules and guide the negotiations. A trusted mediator or third party can help people agree when it seems impossible and can help broker agreements in several ways. These include acting as a convener; a trust bridge; a discussion-rule cop; a negotiation coach; a listener; a common-interest spotter; a resource provider; a creative-idea generator; an offer proposer; a caucus caller; a confidante; a

scapegoat or a face saver; and finally, as a reality check. Regardless, a good negotiator and mediator fosters a spirit of possibility where others see only despair.

Conclusion

As transitions continue to unfold in the Arab world, citizens continue to demonstrate for bread, freedom, and above all, dignity. Popular, pragmatic legitimacy remains on the street, in the mosque, and in social media, which is where it will remain until institutions that are trusted come into being. Countries that have strong, independent institutions have a much better chance of doing well than those with eviscerated or broken institutions. But even in countries with weak institutions and strong personalities at the center of power, there is a space for politics that did not exist before the events of 2011. The rules have changed.

The international community is seeing both a continued contestation of authority and the need

for new ways to bridge the gap between citizen and state. This is even more poignant as external regional and international actors struggle to find a cohesive response to the challenges posed by the uprisings. The 2012 New York Seminar sought answers to these issues but also provoked further questions: What role can external actors play in mediating and aiding democratic transitions? How can state institutions be strengthened in the many countries where they are weak? How should states in transition deal with the issues of transitional justice, the rule of law, and security-sector reform; and how can they make these responsive and accountable to the people? Last but not least, how can the international community support the transitions while respecting the principle of local ownership? Given the call for dignity and the popular nature of the uprisings, it is critical that the international community gets this last question right to ensure the best path for all toward a successful transition to democracy.

Agenda

Managing Transitions in the Arab World

Wednesday, April 18

19:00 – 21:00 **Dinner and Featured Speaker**

Welcome Remarks

H.E. Mr. Abdullah Alsaidi, *Senior Fellow, International Peace Institute*

Keynote Address

Mr. Elias Khoury, *Award-winning author, playwright, and activist*

The societal upheaval that swept through the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 drastically altered the political landscape across the region. Currently, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen are all undergoing delicate political transformations. The purpose of the opening sessions is to provide an overview of the unique experiences of each of these countries and explore what lies ahead for them and the international community as they struggle to redefine themselves.

Thursday, April 19

09:00 – 11:00 **Session 1: Middle East Transition Scene Setter—Egypt and Tunisia**

The first session will focus on Egypt and Tunisia, whose leaders were both compelled to abdicate as a result of sustained domestic pressure. Following this discussion, a speaker specializing in democratic transitions as a whole will provide a comparative analysis.

Chair

Ms. Johanna Karanko, *Minister Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Finland to the United Nations*

Speakers

On Egypt: Mr. Thanassis Cambanis, *Professor of International Affairs, Columbia University, Century Foundation Fellow*

On Tunisia: H.E. Mr. Radhouane Nouicer, *former Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Tunisia in the last Transitional Government of Tunisia*

Discussant

Mr. Youssef Mahmoud, *Senior Adviser, International Peace Institute*

11:00 – 11:15 **Coffee break**

11:15 – 13:15 **Session 2: Middle East Transition Scene Setter—Libya, Yemen, and Syria**

The second session will focus on Libya and Yemen. In both cases external action played a fundamental role in the transition. For Libya, it was external military intervention on the part of NATO. In Yemen, a negotiated transfer of power led by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) paved the way for transition. In addition to covering these two countries' specific cases, the speakers will also analyze the situation in Syria and provide an assessment of the likely course of transition, if any, Syria is to take.

Chair

Mr. Knut Langeland, *Minister Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Norway to the United Nations*

Speakers

On Yemen: Mr. Robert Burrowes, *Professor of Political Science, University of Washington*

On Libya: Ms. Denise O'Brien, *Senior Political Affairs Officer, Department of Political Affairs, United Nations*

On Syria: Dr. Naomi Weinberger, *Professor of International Affairs, Columbia University*

13:30 – 15:00 Lunch

15:00 – 16:30 **Session 3: Global Comparative Perspective of Democratic Transitions**

The third session's aim is to place the democratic transitions of the Middle East and North Africa within a comparative framework with other transitions that have occurred in different regions such as Europe, South East Asia, and Latin America.

Chair

H.E. Mr. Mårten Grunditz, *Permanent Representative of Sweden to the United Nations*

Speaker

Professor Terry Lynn Karl, *Professor of Latin American Studies and Political Science, Stanford University*

Discussant

H.E. Mr. Abdullah Alsaidi, *Senior Fellow, International Peace Institute*

16:30 – 18:00 Break

18:00 – 20:00 Dinner

Friday, April 20

09:00 – 09:05 **Introduction of Professor Seth Freeman** by Ms. Pim Valdre, *Director of External Relations, International Peace Institute*

- 09:05 – 09:20 **Introduction to Negotiations Training**, Professor Seth Freeman, *Columbia University*
- The final day will consist of an introductory training session on negotiations by Seth Freeman of Columbia University, which will be followed by a series of negotiation simulations to provide a practical and tangible application of lessons learned in the introductory session.*
- 09:20 – 10:30 **Multiparty Facilitation: Tulia and Ibad Negotiation Exercise**
- How do you participate effectively in efforts to manage a high-stakes conflict with national and international implications? In the Tulia and Ibad simulation, you will explore this question first hand as you look for ways to negotiate the end to a border war. While that situation may be quite different from your own, the lessons you'll draw from the experience will be quite relevant. After you do the simulation and discuss it with other participants and the professor, you will draw key lessons and discuss ways to apply them to the important situations you are dealing with.*
- The situation: Eight days ago, Tulian rebels attacked a police station in the Tulian President's hometown of Toji. In retaliation, Tulian troops attacked a rebel camp twenty miles inside neighboring Ibad. The troops were withdrawn, but yesterday rebel forces backed by Ibadi troops invaded southern Tulia and advanced on Toji with the announced intention of pressing on to the capital to overthrow the president. The president has requested African Union (AU) intervention, and the AU has called for a ceasefire and sent a delegation to a neighboring neutral country to meet with representatives of Tulia and Ibad.*
- 10:30 – 10:45 Coffee break
- 10:45 – 13:00 **Debriefing and Follow-Up Lecture: Applying the Lessons**
- After the simulation, negotiations consultant Professor Seth Freeman will bring the groups together for a discussion reviewing the breakout group's performance. This is a time to not only hear constructive critiques from Professor Freeman but also for the participants to compare notes and share experiences of their individual sessions to further enhance the educational benefit of the exercise.*
- 13:15 – 14:15 Lunch
- 14:30 Departure for New York City

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