

The Arab World and Lebanon in Transition

The following is the text of the presentation by Mr. Fuad Siniora, former Prime Minister of Lebanon, on November 14, 2012 at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

It is a pleasure to be here with you at the Wilson Center today to talk about the Arab transition and Lebanon at these truly historic times.

The Arab World is currently witnessing two fundamental transformations, which in my opinion are irreversible.

The first is the dynamism within Arab society where the walls of fear and silence are collapsing. The revolutionary movements have launched a process of transformation towards more freedom and more representative and accountable governments: we have seen elections, televised debates, public expressions and demonstrations on the streets of countries where these things were unimaginable only a couple of years ago. The lid is off and the genie of freedom is out of the bottle. The Arab world is being transformed from populations that were afraid of their leaders to leaders that are becoming accountable to their populations.

The second transformation is in Islamic politics or what is referred to as political Islam. Today, Islamic parties are at the helm in Tunisia and Egypt, the first of the Arab Spring countries. These parties are coming out from the intellectual shelter of forced marginalization and oppression to the challenging demands of real world policy issues and choices. Governing is providing them with a lesson that driving from the front seat is very different than driving from the back seat.

They are also quickly realizing that they need to embrace modernity and openness, i.e. they need to change or else they will be changed.

The world needs to judge them on performance; not on preconceived notions, nor on their rhetoric; and a key criterion will be their genuine commitment to the civil state where all citizens are equal in rights and obligations regardless of race, religion or political association.

Underlying both transformations towards more democratic governance and more open and modern political Islam is yet another revolution that has been taking place. I am speaking of communication technology and the access to information and knowledge that has exploded in the Arab world over the past ten years, helping break the barriers of time and place.

The information revolution is irreversible. So is the transformation in governance and in political Islam. But there are many hurdles and pitfalls along the way that can make the road longer and much more painful. One of these is the misguided but to some extent self-fulfilling notion that, somehow, Arabs and Muslims are different than other nations. For them, democracy cannot apply.

The Arab exception is an illusion. So is the Islamic exception. The evolutionary change that has transformed other societies in Southern Europe, South America and Southeast Asia in earlier decades has now reached our shores and deserts, our cities as well as our slums.

But certain perceptions persist, and they feed on setbacks: take the issue of the amateur movie, “The Innocence of Islam” best described by President Obama as “crude and disgusting.” It goes without saying that the acts of violence that we witnessed in reaction to it in some parts of the world are repugnant and immoral by all standards, including the standards and values of Islam itself.

The violent reactions made news and received wide coverage all over the world. This is understandable. It is a fact, however, that those who reacted violently to the movie are a very small minority of Arabs and Muslims, and that should not eclipse the truth about the broader Arab realities.

In the past, dictators used to exaggerate the threat of militant Islam in the Arab world to justify their ruthless rule, especially to the West.

This needs to be better recognized by our friends in the West. For a long time, many believed that peace and security in the Arab and Muslim worlds can only be imposed by autocratic regimes. Unfortunately, these notions are revived when we have incidents like those associated with the anti-Islamic movie. They are false and need to be countered by us all.

Nothing but an Arab world that is free, democratic, and prosperous is the antithesis of militant extremism. Nothing but the full respect of the process toward democratization guarantees lasting stability and minorities' rights, because democracy, unlike other forms of government, has the ability to self-correct.

But we should also remember that the process of change is often long and painful, and even disorderly. Unlike transitions of previous decades elsewhere, the Arab Spring is happening under the scrutiny of the global eye, contributing to high expectations, but also frustrations when setbacks happen. But bumps on the road are to be expected. But the road should be traveled nonetheless. The response to obstacles should be more liberty not less liberty; more democracy and free speech not less. The answer is more Arab Spring, not the same old Arab Autumn.

The West has a responsibility and an interest in empowering the forces of moderation in the region, as well as fostering and providing support for reforms at all levels: political, social, and economic.

This brings me to another challenge: people's expectation of quick economic dividends from the political transition, at a time of global economic deterioration, collapsing investment flows, and rising unemployment. Even in normal times, things usually get worse before they get better after major upheavals.

The main responsibility in facing such economic challenges falls naturally on the newly elected governments to put together policies for short-term stabilization and recovery and for longer-term growth and development. These policies should include reforming social safety nets for those most vulnerable to the transition.

Most importantly, policy plans need to fast-track the necessary reforms in the political, judicial, and administrative institutions, as well as in the business climate, in order to boost investments and enable the private sector to create the 50 million new jobs needed in the Arab world over the coming decade. In this context, now is the time for stronger Arab economic integration that is based on shared interests and objectives.

I am quite optimistic about the ability of our Arab world to face the road bumps and high expectations. But it is yet another challenge that I am truly worried about: ending the age-old injustice in Palestine and the associated Arab-Israeli conflict.

The unresolved problem in Palestine continues to fuel extremism. Moreover, Iran has sought to hijack the causes of the region, ranging from defending the honor of Islam and its prophet, to Jerusalem to Palestine, but for national Iranian objectives. Iran's support of the Syrian regime, suppressing the legitimate quest of the Syrian people for democracy and freedom, is happening directly through Hezbollah's armed personnel, all under the pretext of standing up to Israel. This is the same excuse that the Syrian regime itself has used for 40 years to oppress and imprison the Syrian people.

Recent statements were issued by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard clearly threatening a response by Hezbollah against Israel out of Lebanon if Iran is attacked; and just a couple of weeks ago, Hezbollah, without the consent of the Lebanese people or the Lebanese government, sent a drone into Israeli airspace. We as Lebanese cannot continue to live and progress under the continued threat of fear of being used and abused as a launching pad.

It is ironic that during the times of the Arab Spring, Lebanon, which for the longest time was the regional pioneer in democracy and freedom, is now being taken hostage by a theocracy and a dictatorship; all in the name of the struggle for justice in Palestine.

The recent killing of Brigadier-General Wissam Al-Hassan, the head of the only Lebanese security agency un-penetrated by Syria and Iran, is linked to his uncovering of a diabolic plot by the Syrian regime to explode the situation in Lebanon. The assassination came after assassination attempts on two prominent opposition leaders and seems to be part of a multi-track plan to enhance the Iranian grip on Lebanon until the collapse of the Syrian regime.

That is why we have asked for a government change and for a new non-partisan government to be formed so as to reduce tension, truly insulate Lebanon from what is happening in Syria, and prepare for free elections next summer. We cannot entrust the current government with any of these tasks.

The re-election of President Obama is a great opportunity to tackle the pending issues facing our region. Many have expressed worries regarding the stronger involvement of fundamental elements in Syria; but let us not forget that for the longest time, the uprising in Syria was a peaceful one, that the chants on the street were all about peace and national unity. The atrocities committed by the regime have militarized the conflict. It is the ultimate proof of the nature of this brutal regime that it used so much force against an uprising that started as a call for reform not for regime change. The national coalition for revolutionary forces that was established in Doha a few days ago is a major step that needs to be encouraged and supported. Urgently needed is a quick transition that reverses the dangerous slide towards more violence, which we condemn from whichever side it originates.

We also hope that a second-term will provide President Obama with the necessary impetus to tackle the Palestinian problem. I hope people like you, who are researchers and opinion makers in this vivid democracy, play a role in promoting the argument that a stable democratic Middle East is not possible without a viable Palestinian State. This will contribute significantly to strengthening the forces of moderation and fighting extremism, promoting regional investment, growth, development, and job creation and facilitating the transition towards democratic rule.

Today, Palestine is not on the U.S. agenda. It should be.

The world has become very small. We are all in it together. It is our choice today to either fall in the trap of those whose agendas thrive on permanent conflict and prejudice; or actively pave the way for a better world: a world of mutual respect and inclusion; a world of shared values and objectives; a world of security and prosperity for all.

Thank you for your time.