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FEDERAL MINISTRY OF DEFENCE AND SPORTS

The International Peace Institute's forty-second annual Vienna Seminar took place on May 23–24, 2012, amid an ongoing civil war in Syria, elections in Egypt, rising tensions in Lebanon, and challenging transition processes in Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, and beyond. More than 100 participants took part, including senior government officials from the region, representatives of the diplomatic corps, experts from think tanks, journalists, and students.

Organized in partnership with the Austrian Federal Ministry of Defense and Sports and the Austrian Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs, the seminar focused on the vulnerabilities and triggers behind the uprisings and regional and international responses.

This meeting note was drafted by Walter Kemp, IPI's director for Europe and Central Asia, assisted by Daphne Vafiadis. It reflects the *rapporteur's* interpretation of the seminar discussion and not necessarily the views of all other participants.

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Vienna Seminar 2012

The Uprisings: The Future of North Africa and the Middle East

NOVEMBER 2012

Introduction

“Seldom in the history of the Middle East and North Africa have so many changes taken place so dramatically, so quickly, and at the same time.” This observation, made by a participant at the International Peace Institute's 2012 Vienna Seminar, helps explain the world's current focus on the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East. The purpose of the forty-second annual Vienna Seminar was to make sense of these changes and see what steps can be taken to encourage the positive trends, and to promote peace and security in the region.

Dry Wood and Matches

The seminar's first session began by looking at the factors that had made the societies of the Middle East and North Africa vulnerable to change. Some of the issues raised included corruption, inequality, a youth bulge, unemployment, discontent with governance, and a desire for dignity and respect. It was also noted that people were upset at how leadership in the region had become “sclerotic” and that they resented how presidents were grooming their sons for succession. “The states had been stolen from their people,” said one speaker.

If the dry wood of discontent had been piling up for some time, what were the matches that set it alight? In addition, “if the time bomb was ticking for so long, why did it explode in January 2011?” one participant asked. Some participants attributed the outbreak of the revolutions to small acts of resistance, like the Tunisian vendor who set himself on fire as a protest against corruption. This act was then effectively utilized by a bottom-up movement of like-minded people who, through social media and civil society groups, discovered that they were not alone in their frustration and desire for change.

The question was asked, why were the revolutions so unexpected? The regimes may not have seen the revolutions coming because they were so out of touch with their people. Their allies may not have seen the revolutions coming because they were used to what some described as “autocratic stability.” And while some analysts (such as those writing UNDP's *Arab Human Development Report* of 2005) identified conditions that pointed to serious vulnerabilities within Arab societies, by their nature spontaneous revolutions are hard to predict.

Once people took to the streets, they found safety in numbers and were not afraid because they felt they had nothing to lose. Satellite television and the Internet spread words and images that empowered people to stand up for their rights and dignity, to criticize their governments, and to circumvent state

repression. Young people, in particular, were in the vanguard of calls for change. Given the similarity of grievances, events in one country set an example for others. As a result, the revolution in Tunisia was like an earthquake that sent powerful aftershocks throughout the region.

Dashed Expectations?

“One year ago, the energy of the people was focused on removing the old regimes. But now the task is much harder: to create an alternative,” one participant observed. Among the challenges now faced in the transition process are economic hardships (in particular, high unemployment), security-sector reform, and rebuilding state institutions riddled by corruption and nepotism. All of this is proving to be difficult. Several of the countries that were at the heart of the uprisings are even experiencing negative growth—creating a situation where there is more freedom but fewer jobs. This begs the question, has the revolution, which inspired such high expectations, failed? Has anything really changed for the better?

At the seminar, the point was made that the people who triggered the revolution—including young people and an angry middle class—are not the ones who are profiting from it, and those who are profiting from it (including Muslim political parties) did not trigger it. Indeed, in some countries (like Egypt) there are high age restrictions that prevent many young people from becoming members of parliament.

The 2012 Vienna Seminar took place on the same day as presidential elections in Egypt. Against this backdrop, one participant observed that the country was taking a leap into the unknown by electing a president before his mandate was known, since a new constitution had not been finalized. Nevertheless, the point was made that democracy should be allowed to run its course, however messy the outcome.

The role of the military in the uprisings was discussed. Were the militaries agents of change, or were they on the front lines of counterrevolution? The military may not have supported revolution—the army refused to shoot at its own people in Egypt and Yemen, for example—but it often did not stop the revolutions either. That said, in many countries where the military has played a powerful role in

politics, it still has vested interests that it wants to defend, in addition to protecting state sovereignty. Some participants warned that a military backlash could be expected in countries where elections do not bring the desired results.

The danger of counterrevolution was also raised. Many powerful people have a lot to lose as a result of the revolutions, and others are resistant to change. As one participant put it, “for every revolutionary, there are 10,000 self-appointed guardians of the past.” So who would win out: the revolutionaries or those resisting change?

“Change is Unavoidable”

At the Vienna Seminar, even speakers who feared that there would be a backlash felt that the revolutions had unleashed changes that could not be completely rolled back. “Change is unavoidable,” was a popular sentiment among the participants. Among the changes cited were empowerment of women, the youth’s more active role in politics, greater transparency and freedom of the media, and greater accountability of the military and state leadership. It was also noted that a climate of fear had dissipated: people had a new sense of hope for the future, even in the face of serious challenges. As one participant put it, “the people have become bigger, and the leaders have become smaller.” The voices of the people could no longer be ignored.

That said, the point was made that democracy cannot be created overnight and that the road to the future will, at times, be bumpy. Furthermore, we are only at the beginning of a process that will take years. One participant characterized the current postrevolutionary period as “the first five minutes of a historical hour in the history of the Middle East.” It was therefore suggested that analysts should take a long-term view.

To try to put the fast-changing and dramatic developments in North Africa and the Middle East into perspective, participants looked back to the precedents of previous revolutions.

Historical Precedents

The European revolutions of 1848 and the 1989 revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe were discussed as cases that could provide some perspective. It was noted that the national awakenings of

1848 largely failed since, in most countries, autocratic regimes carried out successful counter-revolutions. Other speakers felt that in the longer term the revolutions had not been a failure since the liberal-democratic seeds that were planted in 1848 eventually blossomed several decades later. The irony was not lost on participants that the Vienna Seminar was taking place in the Marble Hall of Austria's Foreign Ministry, which is decorated with frescoes celebrating the victories of the Habsburgs, including one painting depicting the 1815 Congress of Vienna and the kings and emperors who later led the post-1848 counterrevolution.

The revolutions of 1989 led to the establishment of democratic institutions and civil liberties, as well as greater economic liberalism. This can be attributed in part to the fact that the "political geography" of 1989 was conducive to assisting post-communist states in the process of transition. The European Union, the Council of Europe, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe were clubs that countries in transition wanted to join. Furthermore, these organizations provided security and economic incentives to develop systems of legitimate and accountable governance, and to prevent conflict and promote good-neighborly relations. These conditions do not exist in the Middle East and North Africa today.

Reflecting on the differences in the 1848 and 1989 revolutions, participants asked how the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa could be encouraged to move in the latter rather than the former direction. The suggestion was made that perhaps the region could profit from a new regional mechanism that, like the European institutions of the early 1990s, could provide a framework and incentives for smooth political and economic transition. The need for confidence-building measures, foreign investment, and sustainable development were stressed.

Other speakers pointed out that the history and culture of the Arab world was different than that of Europe, and that change had to be seen through the prism of specific national and regional circumstances. One speaker suggested that the experience of social-democratic revolutions in Latin America could be a more helpful analogy.

A New Political Landscape

There was a vibrant discussion about the impact of the dramatic changes in the Middle East and North Africa on national and regional security. It was noted that the futures of some of these countries, like Egypt and Syria, do not only have domestic implications: they are also linked to regional stability, as demonstrated by the spillover of the Syrian crisis into neighboring countries. There was a lively debate about the political impasse and humanitarian disaster in Syria. The observation was made that the longer the crisis drags on, the greater the risk of long-term instability. Many participants expressed concern about how a lack of resolution of the conflict could lead to a regional conflagration. Others pointed out that this is already happening. As one speaker put it, "the struggle within Syria has become a struggle about Syria and now a regional geopolitical power struggle." Concern was expressed about the lack of a plan B for the peace process put forward by the joint UN-Arab League special envoy Kofi Annan and that failure by the international community to act was undermining the emerging norm of a "responsibility to protect" and the credibility of the United Nations.

The position of Russia was roundly criticized by a number of speakers and vehemently defended by a representative of the Russian Federation. The Russian representative spoke out against externally sponsored regime change and in favor of political dialogue involving representatives of both sides. Other speakers said that the Syrian president had lost legitimacy by attacking his own people and the world could not look away while a humanitarian disaster unfolds.

The suggestion was made that a Yemen-like solution could be found for Syria. Under this arrangement, brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Yemeni president agreed to step down and a process of national reconciliation was initiated. "If the GCC had not taken this step, the region would have been plunged into civil war," said a participant from Yemen.

Others questioned the GCC's role in Bahrain. Why had the United States and others remained silent about the actions of Saudi Arabia and the

Bahraini government in suppressing revolt in Bahrain, when they had encouraged it elsewhere?

More generally, the diplomacy of the United States in the region was questioned. The point was made that respect for the US had decreased. For the people in the streets, President Obama—despite his historic speech in Cairo—was on the wrong side of the revolution at first. When he quickly changed his position and called on President Mubarak to go, it raised eyebrows among leaders in the region who felt that if this was how Washington behaved toward one of its best friends, how would it treat its other allies?

While the traditionally strong role of the United States, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia has diminished, other powers like Turkey and Qatar have stepped into the vacuum. This is creating new dynamics in the region, including new alliances and tensions.

It was noted that the Arab League and the GCC have acquired increased relevance as a result of their handling of the crisis, whereas the European Union has had only limited leverage in engaging with countries in transition.

NATO's role in Libya was debated: was it external interference or a good example of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine in action, particularly to prevent an imminent massacre in Benghazi? The international responses to the crises in Libya and Syria were compared and contrasted. The challenges facing Libya in the post-Qaddafi period were discussed, including tensions between the eastern and western parts of the country, the absence of a Libyan army, and the persistence of militias. In addition, participants highlighted the need for transitional justice, national reconciliation, rebuilding the justice system, reconstruction, and preparing for elections.

The danger of a spillover of instability from Libya to countries in the Sahel region—like Niger and Mali—was also raised. The outflow of weapons, mercenaries, and money were cited as potential triggers for instability in West Africa. One speaker highlighted the need for a preventive regional strategy.

Meanwhile, looming behind all of these upheavals was the specter of Iran developing nuclear weapons. One participant pointed out that “in several countries of the region there is a clear

perception that Iran not only has nuclear military ambitions, but also aspires to regional hegemony and dominance.” Another remarked that the US was partly to blame for a more assertive Iran since it had destroyed two of Iran's neighbors, namely Afghanistan and Iraq. The tensions between Israel and Iran were discussed. It was noted that an attack on Iran would have “unforeseeable consequences” for the region and the wider world. Therefore, more intense negotiations with Iran would be needed.

Participants assessed the impact of the Arab Spring on the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. Some hoped that change generated by the uprisings could promote a new positive impulse for the peace process. Others were less optimistic. As one speaker noted, “the process is stalled because the US is too busy with the elections, the EU is too busy with the financial crisis, the Arabs are too focused on the Arab Spring, and Israel is preoccupied by Iran.” Indeed, the Arab Spring could further delay the peace process since, as one participant noted, Israel is taking a “wait-and-see” approach to gauge the position of the new governments: “For the moment, Israel is condemned to be passive since any move that it would make in favor of one faction or another could prove counterproductive.”

Palestinian representatives taking part in the Vienna Seminar stressed the need to move in a direction of hope, not a direction of violence. They said that Palestinians felt “humiliated” and that failure to address the aspirations of the Palestinian people was leading to disillusionment, frustration, and anger. Lack of progress in the peace process was playing into the hands of hardliners. As a representative of Fatah remarked, “We bet on the success of the peace process, but when it failed, we lost.”

In the discussion, the question was raised as to why change had been less dramatic in monarchies in the region. The point was made that rich monarchies are able to entice their people away from revolts with money. Some monarchies, like Morocco and Jordan, are grappling with change by introducing reforms and shuffling the cabinet. Some participants felt that monarchies were less prone to uprisings because of deference to the royal families. Others felt that the monarchies were more reformist than some of the presidential republics in the region that had started to behave like dynasties.

Nevertheless, it was pointed out that the situation in Morocco and Jordan remains fragile, especially in the latter, which is facing a growing influx of refugees from Syria.

It was observed that one way to reduce pressure on leaderships within the region would be to encourage economic growth through regional trade. For example, it was noted that the closed border between Algeria and Morocco is hurting both countries and that a solution should be found, in this and other cases, to improve trade and good-neighborly relations. This was another argument in favor of a regional mechanism to promote confidence-building measures, security, cooperation, and development.

Political Islam: The Road to Ankara or Tehran?

An issue that arose in a number of sessions of the 2012 Vienna Seminar was the evolution and impact of political Islam on countries emerging from the uprisings.

In elections that took place after the uprisings, Islamic parties did well: in Morocco, 107 out of 395 seats went to the Justice and Development Party; in Tunisia, 89 out of 217 seats went to the Ennahda Movement; in Egypt, 356 out of 508 to Freedom and Justice and Al-Nour; and in Kuwait, 14 out of 50 parliamentary seats went to Islamist parties. It was observed that these parties had the advantage of being well organized and having a clear profile. Therefore, although they did not trigger the revolutions, they have profited from them.

Furthermore, unlike during past revolutions, there was no strong political philosophy: there was no Thomas Paine, John Locke, Karl Marx, or Vaclav Havel. As a result, Islam became a default position. It filled the void of people looking for an identity and answers in a rapidly changing situation in which faith in all established institutions had been eroded.

That said, it was noted that Islamic parties had attracted a large protest vote, and would—like other political parties—be judged by their ability to deliver outcomes to the electorate. This would be a challenge since many of the underlying socioeconomic conditions that had triggered the uprisings

still existed, and in some cases were getting worse. Furthermore, many of the newly elected members of parliament had little experience and would face a steep learning curve.

Several discussants felt that in order to maintain popularity, Islamic parties would have to moderate their views and even join with social democratic parties. It was pointed out that just as there are Christian Democratic parties in Western Europe, there could be moderate Islamic parties in North Africa and the Middle East based on the model of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey. Tunisia was seen as a test case. It is also possible that greater engagement of Islamic parties in daily politics will lead to the pluralization of political Islam, creating “shades of green” as one participant put it.

Concerns were expressed that more radical Islamic parties could take advantage of the situation to rewrite constitutions, curtail human rights, and limit freedoms. The potential influence of Salafists was cited as an example. Yet since the revolutions were a quest for freedom, any attempts by new governments to curtail freedoms could result in a popular backlash.

The question was therefore raised, *quo vadis* political Islam? Will it follow the Turkish model or the Iranian one? It is too early to tell.

Conclusion

Overall, participants concluded that the region is on a roller coaster, and many twists and turns lie ahead. The need for sustained, long-term engagement was stressed in order to encourage the positive elements of change, and to promote democracy and development, not just stability.

The complexity and variable “geometry” of shifting alliances within and between countries of the region will be a challenge for national, regional, and international politics to deal with in the years ahead. Like a kaleidoscope, the picture in the Middle East and North Africa is changing with every turn.

It is too early to predict the outcome of the revolutions. As IPI’s president, Terje Rød-Larsen, observed in his closing remarks, “Today the only thing that is certain is uncertainty. The only thing

that is predictable is unpredictability. The challenge for us all is to ensure that the spark of revolution ignites a beacon of hope and not a wildfire of despair.”

A video of the 2012 Vienna Seminar is available on IPI's website at

www.ipinst.org/events/conferences/details/357-the-impact-of-the-uprisings-ipi-vienna-seminar-2012.html .

Agenda

The Uprisings: The Future of North Africa and the Middle East

Vienna, Austria

Wednesday, May 23, 2012

Venue: Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs

09:30 – 10:00 **Welcoming Remarks**

Terje Rød-Larsen, President, International Peace Institute

10:00–11:30

Session 1

Dry Wood and Matches: Vulnerabilities and Triggers for the Uprisings

What made many societies in the Middle East and North Africa vulnerable to dramatic changes at the beginning of 2011? And what triggered the uprisings? This session will focus on underlying factors like corruption, inequality, the youth bulge, and unemployment, as well as discontent with governance and a desire for dignity and respect. It will also look at what specific issues or events triggered the uprisings, and what factors—like the media and social networking—helped to spread them.

Chair

Terje Rød-Larsen, *President, International Peace Institute*

Speakers

Abdul Karim Al-Eryani, *Former Prime Minister of Yemen, Political Advisor to the President of Yemen*

Rima Khalaf Hunaidi, *Executive Secretary, UN Economic and Social Commission for West Asia*

Robin Wright, *Author and Journalist*

Coffee Break

11:45–13:15

Session 2

Regional and International Responses

This session will focus on debates that took place within multilateral fora (including the United Nations, Africa Union, League of Arab States, NATO, and the Gulf Cooperation Council) about how the international community should respond to the uprisings, particularly violent repression by regimes against their own people. It will compare and contrast why action was taken in some countries but not others.

Chair

Walter Feichtinger, *Head of the Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management, Austrian National Defence Academy*

Speakers

Alia El-Baddiny, *Foreign Affairs Representative and Higher Committee Member of the El-Adl (Justice) Party, Egypt*

Ghazi Ben Ahmed, *Secretary General of the Club de Tunis*

Francois Heisbourg, *Chairman, International Institute of Strategic Studies*

13:15–15:00

Lunch

15:00–16:30

Session 3**Structural or Cosmetic Changes: What Are the Consequences?**

How profound are the changes that are taking place? Are these revolutions or simply changes in leadership? Why have some governments reacted differently than others? What does this suggest about the nature of the political systems in the Arab world—for example, monarchies, republics, and parliamentary democracies? Is there a danger of backsliding or counterrevolutions? What are the prospects for, and potential consequences of, Islamic-based political parties? What are the prospects and pitfalls for the long term?

Chair

Abdullah Alsaidi, *Senior Advisor, International Peace Institute*

Speakers

Mohamad Abdulaziz, *Vice Foreign Minister of Libya*

Vladimir Dedushkin, *Chief Advisor of the Middle East and North Africa Department, Russian Federation*

Volker Perthes, *Director, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP)*

17:30 – 20:30

Reception and dinner**Welcoming Remarks**

Johann Pucher, *Security Policy Director, Austrian Ministry of Defense and Sports*

Thursday, May 24, 2012

Venue:

Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs

09:30–11:00

Session 4**The Uprisings and the Peace Process: Ramifications for Regional Security**

The dramatic developments in North Africa have ramifications beyond the countries directly concerned. Will the uprisings change the narrative in the Arab world, and how have they changed the political landscape within the region? This session will look in particular at the impact of the uprisings on the Middle East peace process as well as the situation in relation to Iran.

Chair

Friedrich Stift, *Head of the Department for Near and Middle East, Austrian Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs*

Speakers

Nabeel Sha'ath, *former Deputy Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority*

Andreas Reinicke, *European Union Special Representative to the Middle East Peace Process*

Ben Segenreich, *Correspondent and Middle East Expert, ORF*

Coffee break

11:15–13:00

Session 5**Future Prospects: A Revolution of Expectations**

The uprisings in the Arab world have happened so quickly and so unexpectedly that the peoples of the region, and the international community, are still coming to terms with the consequences. What are the prospects for the future? Can the expectations that have been created be fulfilled? What are the implications for regional and international relations?

Chair

Edward Mortimer, *Senior Program Advisor, Salzburg Global Seminar*

Speakers

Michael Spindelegger, *Vice Chancellor and Foreign Minister of the Republic of Austria*

Bernard Kouchner, *Former Foreign Minister of France*

Yossi Beilin, *Former Minister of Justice of Israel*

Mohamed El Baradei, *Founder of the "National Association of Change," Director General Emeritus of the IAEA*

Prince Zeid bin Ra'ad Zeid Al-Hussein, *Permanent Representative of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan to the United Nations*

Terje Rød-Larsen, *President, International Peace Institute*

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