



DJUCO



2nd Annual Young Scholars Conference

Has the Arab Spring Failed? – Three Years Later

Tuesday, April 8th 2014

University of Jordan Language Center

Wadi Rum Auditorium

The Center for Contemporary Middle East Studies, University of Southern Denmark and the School of International Studies and Political Science (SISPS), The University of Jordan are pleased to invite students to the Young Scholars Conference 2014, which seeks to answer the question “Has the Arab Spring Failed?”

It has been more than three years since a Tunisian man set himself on fire, thus kick starting a string of events that led to the downfall of authoritarian rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. While the world watched the events unfolding in surprise and astonishment, the Arab people seemed to wake up and filled the streets, demanding reforms.

But for many, the optimism has now turned to disillusionment. In Syria, we are witnessing a horrifying civil war with no end in sight. In Egypt, a democratically elected leader was ousted by the military. In other countries, authorities and militias are competing for control, and in yet others, rulers have passed reforms to calm down the people, or they have cracked down swiftly at the first signs of protest. As for now, Tunisia seems to be our most promising candidate for a successful outcome of the Arab Spring.

So, what happened to the Arab Spring? Has it failed? The Young Scholars Conference will examine this question by centering on three different panel themes. These panel debates, where selected master students will have the opportunity to present their research papers, will cover 1) Radicalism and Extremist Movements 2) Democratic Transitions and Democracy Promotion 3) Youth and Gender. The debates will be moderated by Jordanian and Danish senior researchers and inspire broader debates in plenum.

Please find elaborations of the themes of the conference below and how to participate in the paper contest.

Registration: To register for the conference, we kindly ask you to e-mail your name, university, and field of study to djuco.amman@gmail.com no later than Thursday the 3rd of April at 12 a.m. It is free to attend the Young Scholars Conference 2014. The conference will be held in English.

Paper competition

As part of Young Scholars Conference 2014, we invite Master's students from the University of Jordan, AUB, AUC, AUS, and the University of Southern Denmark to participate in an academic paper competition. The authors of the best papers will be invited to give a 15 minutes presentation of their papers and participate as a panelist in one of the panel debates.

Paper guidelines

Papers submitted should address one of the topics described below and should include the following:

- 1) Student's name, address, postcode, city, e-mail address and tel.no.
- 2) Title of the paper
- 3) Indication of which topic the paper relates to
- 4) Abstract of maximum ½ page

The paper may not exceed 7 pages double-spaced including the abstract but excluding references. If the paper does not meet the requirements, it will not be considered for assessment.

The deadline for submission is 15 March 2014 and should be sent to djuco.amman@gmail.com. Papers received after 15 March 2014 will not be considered for assessment.

The conference is part of Project DJUCO (Danish – Jordanian University Cooperation) – a university cooperation between the Center for Contemporary Middle East Studies, University of Southern Denmark and the School of International Studies and Political Science, University of Jordan.

For more information on DJUCO, please visit: www.djuco.org and www.facebook.com/projectdjuco

For more information on SISPS, please visit: international.ju.edu.jo/Home.aspx or www.facebook.com/UJSISPS

Preliminary Program

- 16.00-16.30: Registration
- 16.30-18.00: Panel 1 – Radicalism and Extremist Movements
- 18.00-18.15: Coffee break
- 18.15-19.30: Panel 2 – Democratic Transitions and Democracy Promotion
- 19.30-19.45: Coffee break
- 19.45-21.15: Panel 3 – Youth and Gender
- 21.15-21.30: Closing remarks

Panel 1 – Radicalism and Extremist Movements

The beginning of the Arab Spring captured the attention not only of the region, but also of the world. The globe closely watched the region's peaceful protests to longstanding authoritarian regimes with hopeful anticipation of a regional democratic transition. While some countries did achieve initial success in overthrowing dictators or passing governmental reforms, many of these once peaceful movements have regressed into violence.

In Syria, what began as a peaceful opposition to longstanding dictator Bashar al Assad turned into one of the worst humanitarian crisis in recent history; a bloody war with no end in sight. Political Islam's role in Syria turned from a moderate, centric stance to a gathering point for jihadist and Al Qaeda groups. In Iraq, the worsening sectarian conflict continues to attract extremists on both sides of the conflict.

In these countries as well as others in the region, some scholars blame the descent into violence upon religious extremism and radicalism. However, variation of country cases within the Arab Spring demonstrates that there is a need for contextualization of Political Islam within each country. There is an Islamic political presence in each of the MENA countries, but its impact varies across the different countries including Libya, Yemen, Tunisia, and Egypt, with different manifestations of Political Islam, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis, jihadists, and Al Qaeda. Each of these groups has emerged within the political sphere in different ways and must be analyzed individually as such. For instance, in Egypt, some interpret the radicalization process in Egypt as the consolidation of traditional political Islam ideologies. Others view it as a reaction to politics of exclusion or a continuation of the old authoritarian regime.

It is clear that the varying experiences of Islamists within the Arab Spring countries highlight a need for a contextually conditioned interpretation of radicalism and extremism in the Arab Spring. This need is accompanied by a need to consider the following questions: has radicalism ruined the Arab Spring or has the regional instability created and fostered extremism instead? What does the current status of radicalism in the region indicate for the future of the regional transition?

Panel 2 – Democratic Transitions and Democracy Promotion

Since the onset of the Arab Spring, the MENA region has echoed with calls for democracy, civil liberties, and government transparency and accountability. Though these calls have been largely universal in principal across the region, the way in which these demands have been sought and achieved vary widely. On one hand, Libya's democratic transition was achieved through the combined assistance of its rebel fighters as well as the international community. On the other, Syria remains embroiled in a violent civil war while the international community stays divided upon the proper course of action.

Furthermore, while the demands of the Arab Spring were indeed universal in the beginning, each country is dealing with its own set of issues in the attempt to achieve its democratic goals. Three years after the start of the Arab Spring, some even say that these countries have completely failed to address the issues that were and continue to motivate the popular uprisings. Though Egypt's elections were initially hailed as a sign of democratic success, the military overthrow of its first elected president cast doubts upon Egypt's transitional success.

The region's political and social complexities find these countries far from achieving stability and a peaceful democracy. Some regard the MENA region as simply not ready for democratic change due the lack of democratic institutions. Others argue that Islam, which plays an active role in the region, is not compatible with democracy and the persistence of states to incorporate Islam in politics as with the case of Egypt will result in a failed attempt at democracy. They argue that since Islamists view their political impositions as God-given, there is no way for them to be open to the nature and type of institutions required for democracy.

On the other side of the debate are those who believe that such a view is both premature and based on incorrect assumptions. Democratic transitions are often turbulent and not straightforward. While bloodshed in Syria, struggle in Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen and a disastrous experiment in Egypt might indicate to some that the Arab Spring has failed, not all Arabs have reached this conclusion. Countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Turkey, indicate that Islamists have been successful at democratic transitions outside the MENA region, showing that democracy and Islam are both compatible and possible in the near future. Such scholars believe that political change is not an easy and rapid occurrence and can be marked with violence, bloodshed and radicals as with the case of the transition from communism. They believe that the societal awakening that has taken place in these regions among the people will continue to fuel the quest for democracy and obstacles in the way are a natural and expected occurrence in such a transition.

Panel 3 – Gender and Youth

Youth served as the primary social force behind the Arab Spring.¹ They organized, demonstrated, and kept the calls for democracy and government accountability alive despite repeated cases of authoritarian crackdowns and repression. Unemployment and social unrest played a major role in pushing this demographic to demand better from their governments. Youth unemployment in the Arab world is at about 25 percent, the highest level in the world.² Gender also played a prominent role in these calls for reform, as women demanded equal rights and opportunities in the social, civil, and economic spheres of life.

These efforts culminated in various ways throughout the region, from destabilization, reform, or overthrow of authoritarian regimes, to democratic transitions of others. Though groups united by youth or gender interests did play a significant role in instigating this change, it is less clear that this change promoted or reflected their goals. In Egypt, though the original protests were instigated mainly by youth, the resulting elections saw the Muslim Brotherhood take power. Some assert that the authoritarian nature of the region left most countries without strong political parties or civil society, leaving most groups without the democratic infrastructure in which to organize. While youth were able to use tools like social media to create a grassroots protest of the regime, achieving a place in political governance required organization and infrastructure that few groups, other than Islamic organizations like Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood or Tunisia's Ennahda, possessed.

Three years later, many youth and gender groups still feel far away from their goals, feeling left out of the governance decisions and directions in which their countries are headed. A recent poll demonstrated that the “position of youth in new institutions of governance is not commensurate with the role they played in the success of the revolutions.”³ Three years in, it is important to assess the progress that has been made, why youth and gender is in its current situation, and how it can play a role in the transitional politics of the region.

¹ Haddad, Mohammed and Basma Atassi. 2013. “Interactive: The Youth of the Arab Spring.” *Al Jazeera*. www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2013/07/201372992935843820.html

² “Unemployment: Arab Spring Not Springing Back.” *NPR*. 9 September 2013. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=219725270>

³ Haddad, Mohammed and Basma Atassi. 2013. “Interactive: The Youth of the Arab Spring.” *Al Jazeera*. www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2013/07/201372992935843820.html