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**SESSION 8: ARAB SPRING: THE MIDDLE EAST IN TRANSITION**

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MR. TELHAMI: It's really important to start by trying to interpret what it is that we're witnessing in this great hour of awakening of the 21st century. What does it mean? Why were people surprised, what did we know, what didn't we know?

I want to start with the surprise element. At one level there was really hardly any surprise in the fact that the public across the Arab world was unhappy, that we knew for a long time. Every single year I conducted an annual Arab public opinion poll, I've been doing it for a decade, and every single year we've been saying that the gap between public and government is widening on all sorts of issues, including how people define themselves, issues of identity. In fact, the puzzle has never been when will Arabs have reason to revolt, it's always been why haven't they revolted already? We've documented this every single year.

Why then were people surprised? Part of it is, of course, revolutions are rare in history, and it's much easier to make one mistake and be criticized for missing it than predicting revolution for 20 consecutive years and being wrong.

Now we know how this works. Part of it is that we social scientists are not very good at predicting change anyway because we're trained to think scientifically, which means what? It means looking at the patterns of the past and projecting them onto the future, and change is exactly a break from the past, so when it does happen it's very hard to anticipate.

But there is a critical element why people missed it that has to do more with how one translates anger, public anger, into revolutions. Our prevailing feeling is it's not enough to have a lot of angry people to create revolution. What you need is to get them to be mobilized, to get them to be organized, to get them to play a role in overthrowing governments. For that the assumption was you needed political parties, you needed social organizations, and you needed leadership, the sort that governments assured would never take place. They were very good at it, year after year, they would preempt, they would disrupt, and they would prevent organizations. Short of that, the assumption was that it's very hard to translate this pervasive anger into revolution.

Comes the information revolution, which, I think, is the new element that really changed the political environment. When we undertook the project 12 years ago to study our public opinion, the project was really about how the information revolution is impacting public opinion and identity in the Arab world. We knew there was an information revolution that started with Arab satellites in the 1990s. What we didn't know is how it's going to impact notions of identity, how it's going to impact mobilizations, how it's going to impact politics. We've been studying it empirically every single year, and we've seen the trends and the change over time. But the information revolution, by which I mean first the satellite TV, then the Internet and social media, has had a very substantial impact on political organization.

Number one, it robs governments of the monopoly of information. Governments can't lie to their public anymore. It's just hard to do, and, by the way, also it was very hard for governments to create identification with their public. We've been measuring the change in collective identity in the Arab world as

governments were robbed of this monopoly of information.

Second, the information revolution provided the public with information about what the rest of the world has that they don't have, so it raised expectations far more, and I would argue, even empowered the individuals in ways we have not seen in the Arab world. This in some ways is a revolution of individual empowerment, not just of collective revolt.

And third, the knowledge that others outside the world are watching you is empowering and very meaningful through that interactive process.

But most importantly, fourth, it provided people with instruments of organization that didn't depend on traditional political parties, that didn't depend on leadership. And with it they were able to get large numbers in the public square, and once you get to hundreds of thousands of people it's very hard for governments to deter anymore. They lose control, but you need it to start.

Now what is this about in the first place? Why are people out there? Initially in Tunisia, people were saying this is a food revolution. Well obviously food and poverty matter, we all know it, and obviously unemployment matters, all these things matter, but in the first place this is not a food revolution. We can see it because most of the original organizers, they're obviously people who mobilize because of the economy, but the initial organizers were not the poor. They were the Wael Ghoneim type of Egyptian, the Google executive, the educated people who had access to the Internet, who had good jobs.

This was in the first order about dignity, it was about freedom, and it was about identity. They could no longer identify with the governments. We could see that on foreign policy issues and domestic policy issues.

These rulers didn't speak for them, and in some ways they were ashamed by them. That created a lot of tension. But we see that much of this empowerment, much of this mobilization, isn't in the first order about economy, although the economy obviously will matter increasingly as we move forward.

What do we expect? What should we expect? First, obviously, not all of these revolts and uprisings are going to translate into full democracy. That is too much to expect, but one thing that is clear in all of this is that what we have here is a public empowerment that is with us to stay. In part because of the information revolution that is expanding over the past decade, and we've measured it every single year, huge expansion of the information revolution.

By the way, just since the overthrow of Mubarak in Egypt, there are two million new subscribers to the Internet. If you look at the new Facebook subscribers in the world for the past few months, some of the most rapid ones are coming from the Arab world.

So it is extraordinary how much expansion there is. It does mean that whatever happens in these politics, obviously public opinion is never the only force, and even in democracies you have all kinds of powerful institutions in every society, but it does mean that public opinion could no longer be ignored, it is part of the politics of every single country, both domestically and in foreign policy. You can see even governments that haven't changed much are trying to address what the public wants.

Second, the ultimate result in every country is going to depend on several factors. First, the extent to which there is diversity inside. In the case of Egypt and Tunisia, they were homogenous societies. In other cases we have a lot of differences. That public mobilization could have one segment of the public pitting itself against another segment of the public, and that will complicate the process.

The degree to which a society is isolated from the outside world— I would argue that the more isolated a society is, the less able the public is to revolt effectively for a variety of reasons, because they don't have access to the information revolution in the same way and their governments are less sensitive to the outside world than those that are plugged in.

Third, wealth. Economy does matter, although it's not the central issue. Obviously those who got a little bit more money can buy loyalty up to a point, but remember that's not going to be enough to protect them, because in the first place this is not a revolution about food.

Finally, the outside-world reaction. How the outside world reacts matters a lot, and in terms of the actual centrality of issues as we look at the entire region, what happens in Egypt is going to be a key to determining, in some ways, the outcome elsewhere. Egypt is a huge role model, and I think it is central in the shape of the outcomes in the years to come. We have to focus on Egypt.

Let me end with three quick conclusions about the impact. First, if you look at this series of revolutions—I'm calling them revolutions, but obviously uprisings, and in some cases they haven't turned into full revolutions—what has been striking, extraordinary really, over the past few months is that most of them have been remarkably peaceful, in some ways accidentally, but when it started accidentally, peaceful people learned that it was actually powerful and effective, and it didn't play into the hands of governments by pointing fingers.

They're all emulating it, and Yemen has been extraordinary in that, despite all the weapons out there, despite all the differences within society, the demonstrators themselves have remained relatively peaceful, despite attacks from government and security services. This is extraordinary.

The second is the largely non-ideological nature of the early revolts. Unlike what was expected in the past, that this would be an Islamist series of revolutions in the Middle East, this has been largely non-ideological. Sure, a lot of other segments of society have entered into it, including the Islamists, but by and large it's non-ideological, and that does mean to me the following: The success of peaceful Arab revolutions is Bin Laden's nightmare. It is exactly the antidote to militant extremism. Everybody should be interested in seeing the success of peaceful revolutions in the Arab world, because, if it does not work, that energy is not going to go away.

This is empowerment that is a function of the information revolution, it is going to stay with us. It is going to be here for the long term. If it's not going to find what it wants through peaceful means, you can bet that it's going to go in militant ways, and then it'll become the world's nightmare, and so we have investment separate from the other issues in making it succeed.

In the short term there are two issues that will undoubtedly be impacted by it that are important for the international community. One is the Arab/Israel issue and the other is Iran, and I think the Arab/Israel issue is going to be impacted in a big way.

The first order, the Arab public is far angrier with Israel than their governments have been over the past few years, and therefore that sensitivity to public opinion means a lot more tension in the relations between Israel and the Arab world in the short term. It does also mean that the prospects of the Israeli/Palestinian peace in the short term diminish, because it's very hard for the Palestinian authority to make concessions in a revolutionary environment, particularly when its legitimacy is under siege.

But for the long term there will be opportunities. And those opportunities come from two trends. One is that Israel now is worried about the Israeli/Egyptian treaty, which has been the anchor of Israel's policy in the region. Re-validation of the Egyptian/Israeli treaty will be worth more to Israel than maybe peace with the rest of the Arab world. Therefore a comprehensive peace that re-validates the Israeli/Egyptian treaty will be worth more to Israel today than it was six months ago.

And for the Arab world, Arab rulers don't want to be distracted by the Arab/Israeli conflict, and they want a cover for a comprehensive peace. I think that there will be an opportunity for more comprehensive plans down the road.

Finally, on the issue of Iran, I know a lot of people say that Iran is the beneficiary of the Arab

revolutions. I disagree profoundly. Iran's influence in the Arab world has three different dimensions. One is negative, which is the absence of Arab leadership, the absence of leaders that inspire the Arab people. The absence of countries that inspire the Arab people has meant that Arabs are going to Iran by default. We see it in my polling every single year, how Iran's popularity increased only as a reaction to the vacuum of leadership in the Arab world.

This revolution has revived Arab pride. You can see the slogans in many Arab capitals, including in Egypt. "Raise your head, you're an Egyptian." "Raise your head, you're an Arab." There's a revival of pride, and Egypt is, once again, emerging as a potentially inspiring country, and the rise of Egypt as an inspiring country will be the biggest headache of Iran's influence on the Arab world.

Iran obviously still has two instruments of influence down the road. One is the Arab/Israeli conflict. When that's not resolved, they capitalize on that, and that has to be addressed. The second is Shia/Sunni polarization: The stronger that is, the more they benefit. So everybody has an interest, in a way, in pursuing a policy that reduces the Shia/Sunni polarization in the Arab world as we move forward.

But there is no question in my mind that this is a great Arab awakening that is with us to stay. It's more for the better. We're going to have a rocky period, but we all have an interest in seeing peaceful revolutions succeed, particularly since the aims are primarily freedom, democracy and dignity.

CHAIRMAN HAN: I have just one question to ask. One thing that distinguishes this movement is the internationalization phenomenon. That is in terms of foreign intervention and, or involvement I should say probably, and the contagion aspect of it. Why do you think it is and what would be the effect of the internationalization?

MR. TELHAMI: For one thing, of course, across the Arab world it is part of a global issue because you have to see the media as part of the global revolution, so in some ways that media connects. The fact that Wisconsin can be inspired by Tahrir Square in Cairo is something that is remarkable, actually, in this day and age.

In fact, the Brookings Institution, of which I'm also a non-resident senior fellow, is having the U.S.-Islamic World Forum starting in two days.

I'm releasing a poll here in the U.S. about how Americans are internalizing Arab revolutions. We have a lot of interesting changes that have taken place in terms of how people here are beginning to see the regions, based on what they're witnessing.

I do think there is a global impact we see in other places around the world, including Iran and even China, where there were people worried about the consequence. But I have to say that since the media is the central factor in all this, what makes the Arab world a little bit unique is that all of the Arab countries speak roughly the same language, and so they understand the same media. So when we're talking about satellite television, we're talking primarily about transnational television, especially Al Jazeera TV and al-Arabiyya, But Al Jazeera by the way, according to my polls, in half the Arab states is the single most important source of international news for them, half the Arabs. And roughly two-thirds, actually more than two-thirds—in Egypt it's 88 percent—say it's either their first choice or second choice for news, so that shared media, the shared information through language, has a separate and important impact that the rest of the world doesn't feel in the same way.

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