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THE BEGINNINGS OF TRANSITION:
POLITICS AND POLARIZATION
IN EGYPT AND TUNISIA

A LETTER FROM CO-CONVENERS SALMAN SHAIKH AND SHADI HAMID

Egypt and Tunisia have both held relatively successful elections, ushering in parliaments with popular mandates. Both countries also saw landslide Islamist victories which provoked fear among both Arab liberals and the international community. The Brookings Doha Center (BDC) held its first “Transitions Dialogue” in January 2012, with the hope of providing a venue for addressing the emerging tensions that complicate and undermine prospects for successful transitions. With Egypt and Tunisia embarking on a long process of constitution writing and national dialogue, the Islamist-liberal divide is of particular concern, especially in light of the growing influence and reach of Salafi groups.

While national debates over identity and the role of religion in public life cannot be ignored, there are areas of political convergence between various parties – on the economy, foreign affairs, and the importance of civilian rule for example – that are just as important, if not more so.

This dialogue, chaired by BDC Director Salman Shaikh and Research Director Shadi Hamid, was the first of its kind to bring together mainstream Islamists, Salafis, liberals, and leftists along with U.S. and European officials to exchange ideas, develop consensus, and forge new understandings in a rapidly changing political environment. It also presented a unique opportunity for Egyptians and Tunisians to compare their different transition processes and see what, if any, lessons could be learned.

The program consisted of four sessions focusing on constitution drafting and the role of political institutions, economic recovery, the role of international actors, and ideological polarization and the role of religion in public life. These discussions were followed by country-specific working groups, in which Egyptians and Tunisians discussed immediate challenges and lessons learned in their own countries. Each group then shared their observations with the other. Many analysts have pointed to the “Tunisian model” as an example for the region. With this in mind, we were interested to see how

the Egyptian and Tunisian participants would interact, considering the extent to which their fortunes have diverged.

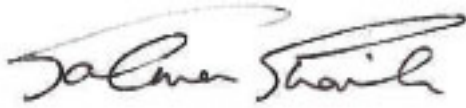
Interestingly, until now, there has been little formal exchange or dialogue between the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Al-Nahda in Tunisia, despite being the dominant Islamist parties in their respective countries. The same goes for leftists and liberals. Participants from one country routinely expressed surprise at what those from the other were saying. One Egyptian participant noted, for example, that if the Al-Nahda representative were in Egypt, he would be called a liberal.

Throughout the discussions, there was a sense that the political spectrum in each country was anchored in a very different place. Tunisians were surprised when a representative from Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood complained that, during the election campaign, his party had been attacked by far-right Salafis as being too “liberal.” One Egyptian liberal, who was a candidate for parliament, complained: “I did not run a political campaign; I was running a campaign that depended on me telling voters I’m not an atheist.” At the same time, however, a Tunisian leftist observed that the Egyptian Salafi participant seemed considerably more moderate than Salafis in Tunisia, due in part to the former’s decision to commit to working within the democratic process.

Concerns over ideological polarization were raised repeatedly by both Egyptians and Tunisians. There was a general consensus that issues of identity had too often distracted from more urgent matters, namely addressing economic development, unemployment, and poverty. It was here that an important back-and-forth took place regarding the role that Western countries could play in helping stabilize Arab economies. Despite suspicion of Western intentions, nearly all participants agreed that the United States and Europe had an important role to play through economic assistance, with an emphasis on enhanced trade and investment. A fruitful discussion ensued between Arab and Western par-

ticipants over what role the latter could play in supporting democratic reform and economic growth in these two transitioning countries.

The Arab uprisings will have a profound impact on policymaking and the future political landscape in the Middle East. With so much at stake, the transition process needs to be skillfully managed in order to lay the foundation for stable and sustainable governance. Discussions such as this one are an important step in exploring and better understanding this process.



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THE BEGINNINGS OF TRANSITION: POLITICS AND POLARIZATION IN EGYPT AND TUNISIA

What follows is a summary of the major themes and tentative conclusions that emerged from the wide-ranging discussions, in each of the four areas of focus. Taken as a whole, they provide Western policymakers – as well as political actors in Egypt and Tunisia – with insights and recommendations for how to grapple with the challenges of transition.

CONSTITUTION-DRAFTING AND THE ROLE OF POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

Lack of clarity feeds disagreement on the mechanics of transition. The absence of a clear and credible authority responsible for driving the transition can be a significant obstacle to political stability, and can fuel polarization. This lack of clarity has distracted from important debates over the nature of political structures, such as the role of parliament and the presidency. In Tunisia, the balance of powers remains unresolved, while in Egypt it has rarely been addressed in any great detail. In Egypt, doubts remain over the viability of a process that will almost certainly see a president elected before his powers have been defined. Some Egyptian participants called on the major political parties to do more to lead a public discussion and, in the process, provide a steadier hand and a clearer vision for the transition. Given the still significant disagreements over the mechanics of the transition – the timing of SCAF’s departure, the weighting of presidential and parliamentary powers, and the drafting of a constitution – political actors should focus not on desired outcomes, but rather on a process through which such questions can be addressed and resolved.

Who should guide transitions? As polarized as Egypt’s politics are, there is growing consensus on one important issue – the role of the armed forces. The Egyptian participants agreed that SCAF had failed in its management of the transition and should renounce all political powers at least by the June 30 deadline that has been set. Many were suspicious of SCAF’s appetite for power, and hoped that a more credible opposition leadership that could hold it to account would emerge in the coming months. In contrast, the Higher Committee for the Achievement of Revolutionary Objectives

(HCARO) – as a revolutionary, consensus-focused guarantor of the transition – was cited as key to the success of Tunisia’s process. In Tunisia, political legitimacy was concentrated first in the HCARO, and then in the elected constituent assembly, which claims both legislative and executive authority. While some fear that such a concentration of power in one body will distort the political map, all political forces consider the assembly the primary venue for political action. In short, while there will always be disagreement over outcomes, the process in Tunisia is seen as legitimate, therefore increasing the likelihood that the resulting outcomes will be respected by all. Such a path has proved continually elusive in Egypt, with angry disagreements over the composition of the constituent assembly further complicating the establishment of credible and consensus driven process.

Revolution versus reform. Among the Egyptian participants in particular, some discussion focused on a perceived divide between radical and reformist approaches to fulfilling the goals of the revolution. Some argued that, in failing to take to the streets, the Muslim Brotherhood had abandoned revolutionary forces and had actively fed perceptions of the “Tahrir youth” as a destabilizing and extremist element. Islamist representatives emphasized that while recent protests may have been in good faith, supporting them would have been irresponsible given the potential for increased violence. They argued that a long-term vision for reform was necessary and that too hasty or too radical an approach could be detrimental, and did not enjoy widespread popular support. Tunisian participants did not cite the problem of continued protests, and argued that the inclusion of the “revolutionary youth” in decision making bodies may have played a role in institutionalizing these elements and encouraging them to avoid a return to the streets.

CIVIL-RELIGIOUS DEBATES: HOW TO ADDRESS IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION

Increased political polarization and its effects. Participants from both Egypt and Tunisia complained of political polarization along ideological

lines, an issue which has only increased in recent months and now threatens to undermine Egypt's constitution drafting process. These divisions, participants said, were fed by former regimes, both in their failure to provide for citizens (leaving space to be filled by sub-state actors), and in their propagation of an "us or them" rhetoric on Islamists. In Egypt, early divisions along ideological lines emerged over the March 2011 constitutional referendum, which then set the tone for future standoffs.

March's constitutional battle compromised the "values of the square," which had placed a premium on national unity. Those who voted "yes" in the referendum were branded traitors of the revolution, while the Islamist movement mobilized its considerable resources against the "no" camp, sometimes using religious language to de-legitimize its opponents. More recently, parliamentary elections were fought almost entirely on identity-based, rather than issue-oriented campaigns. The extent of polarization has detracted from issues on which there is both potential and an urgent need for joint action, such as the economy. Yet, as several participants noted, appealing to voters' religious sentiments has proven effective in Egypt, which is why politicians are doing it. If religious and identity-based rhetoric wins votes, then how can you avoid it?

Despite their own polarization, Islamists, leftists, and liberals in Tunisia managed to put aside their very real differences to form a coalition government. Incidents of disagreement certainly continue to arise as in the recent proposal for a break for prayer in assembly. Though members of the Islamist Al-Nahda party wanted the time labeled as such, both sides agreed that breaks would occur but would not be specifically designated for prayer. Participants agreed that while such issues may seem trivial to outsiders, they mask real ideological divides and therefore must be tackled. In February and March, debate over the role of sharia in Tunisia's constitution became increasingly heated, with Salafis staging protests demanding the rule of Islamic law.

Addressing polarization: build consensus, focus on socio-economic issues. Participants emphasized the importance of national dialogues for building mutual understanding and finding areas of

shared concern. In Tunisia, HCARO proved crucial in compelling parties to forge consensus. The experience of building a ruling Islamist-secular coalition in parliament illustrated the critical importance of – and potential for – compromise. Tunisian participants spoke of the need for a "national dialogue forum" to help gather political figures and stakeholders, and promote frank debate over ideological concerns in a neutral area. One Egyptian participant spoke of the importance of "defining the national interest" in efforts to unify political forces and dispel ideological scaremongering. Another participant, a member of Tunisia's constituent assembly, said that establishing a party-associated think tank to study post-revolutionary strategies in other transitions had been useful. Lessons had been learned about the danger of "polarized politics," and her party became one of the first to call for a focus on socio-economic issues, rather than ideological programs.

ADDRESSING ECONOMIC RECOVERY

Economic challenges facing Egypt and Tunisia. Egypt and Tunisia face daunting economic challenges, above all in job creation and attracting investment. Political instability, particularly in Egypt, has had devastating impact on the economy, discouraging investors and damaging the tourism sector. Private sector growth, particularly through SMEs, will be needed to fuel economic recovery in both countries. Since the uprisings began, most governments in the region have focused on appeasing the public by accommodating growing social demands – rather than dealing with root economic problems. But unpopular reforms, however difficult they may be, will be necessary to sustain political gains and improve economies in the long term.

There was some debate about the role government should play in the economy – whether it should allow the free market to take the fore or adopt a more interventionist approach, providing generous social packages to reduce inequality and combat poverty. In Tunisia, though substantial political gains have been sustained, participants expressed concern that if economic reforms are not implemented in a timely fashion, the revolution's goals may be at risk. A senior figure from Al-Nahda said that the party is under growing popular pressure to deliver econom-

ic reforms as quickly as possible. If Al-Nahda does not deliver, he feared, Tunisians may lose faith in the new government. Recognizing Tunisia's difficult economic challenges, the United States recently announced that it would provide an additional \$100 million in debt aid to the country.

In Egypt, the issue of the military's role in the economy was repeatedly raised. The military stands at the head of a massive economic empire that has land appropriation rights, is untaxed, and enjoys preferential exchange rates. One participant wondered whether revenues could be raised through selling military-owned land. On the political side, there were questions about the Brotherhood and the Salafis' willingness to open such a controversial file in parliament, while some argued that confronting the military on its economic role would be unwise and distract from more immediate issues of its interference in day-to-day political life.

THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL ACTORS IN POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Re-shaping the nature of long-term foreign assistance. Looking forward, the international community should articulate its economic assistance to Egypt and Tunisia in terms of partnerships that prioritize each party's strategic interests, with a focus on facilitating long-term growth by developing trade agreements and investment structures. There was consensus among participants that the emphasis should be on investment rather than aid. Economic partnerships would ultimately prove more productive than economic dependency.

Some insisted that these trade agreements should not compromise local interests, or be made contingent on particular policies – as many felt was the case in Egypt's experience with the Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZs). There was a general desire to maintain ties with the United States and Europe, while also increasing regional cooperation – including with the Gulf – and seeking new partners elsewhere. Opportunities for the sharing of best practices should be promoted. Assistance from the Gulf in particular should be increased, and also made more transparent.

Western commitment to democratic transitions.

Representatives from Western governments were eager to express their commitment to democratic transitions in Egypt and Tunisia – which they said upheld both their interests and values. They emphasized that they would recognize all actors that were democratically elected as long as they respected human rights and adhered to international norms, including upholding international treaties, protecting minority and women's rights, and ensuring alternation of power. Inconsistencies in the West's approach to the region during the Arab Spring – advocating reform more aggressively in some countries than others – were explained by a need for tailored, country-specific strategies, and by the notion that “durable transitions must be led by local actors.”

Participants emphasized the need for immediate economic assistance to ensure the sustainability of transitions. Such “cushion support” has in many cases been offered, but delivery has been stalled due to a lack of follow-through on behalf of donors (including in explaining their assistance priorities), and a failure by Egyptians and Tunisians to formulate plans for how such funds would be spent and accounted for. Suggestions that there should be a comprehensive framework for U.S. assistance to the Arab world – along the lines of a Marshall Plan – were put forward by some participants. One U.S. representative said that such a plan had been discussed early on, but did not find much support given resource constraints, and the fact that other institutions – the G8 and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development for example – were seen as more appropriate interlocutors.

A new approach from the West – mutual understanding, respect, and engagement. Both regional actors and Western representatives stressed that relations between Western governments and newly elected forces in Egypt and Tunisia should be based on mutual respect and engagement. Many supported the idea of establishing formal “Strategic Dialogues” with the United States to identify joint priorities and possibly host civil society or business cooperation. Some resentment was expressed toward what was seen as an obsessive focus on Arab countries' position toward Israel. Arab participants argued that new avenues for dialogue and cooperation should focus primarily on internal issues and

not on foreign policy orientations. Some emphasized that overcoming mistrust of U.S. assistance and engagement would depend on Washington's ability to endorse a wholesale reconsideration of the conditions attached to its aid – including in relation to Israel – or, alternatively, to genuinely address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

One U.S. official explained American support for dictators over democratic actors in the past as a feature of the fact that “we live in the world.” Democratic countries, however, would always be more reliable partners, even if they are occasionally more difficult to deal with. Another American official added that past relations with autocratic regimes had caused much “pain, suspicion, and fear,” and that having the Brotherhood in power in a place like Egypt would be in U.S. interests if it meant a more democratic and stable Egypt.

For their part, Egyptian participants all agreed that the Camp David treaty should be respected but that certain clauses may be open to amendment. One leader of a liberal party argued that the demilitarization of Sinai – which has compromised security in the territory and facilitated smuggling and incursions – could come to an end. The sale of natural gas to Israel at preferential rates would also likely change.

Foreign aid to civil society – blessing or curse?

Foreign assistance to civil society organizations is an area fraught with tension, as has become increasingly clear in recent months. Some participants remained suspicious of all forms of external aid – a view which may explain why SCAF feels it can afford to confront and threaten civil society organizations, even at the risk of losing American assistance in the process. Others emphasized that a wholesale rejection of such assistance was neither necessary nor realistic, and that excessive regulation of assistance to non-governmental organizations had in fact hindered opportunities for more frequent and open engagement. Representatives from the United States – which has repeatedly come to blows with the Egyptian government over its treatment of NGOs – were eager to dispel concerns that it was partisan in its selection of aid recipients and backed the calls for a civil society that “developed organically, free of any dominance or manipulation.” They also em-

phasized that assistance and training were open to all organizations regardless of ideological orientation – responding to concerns raised by some that the United States was backing liberal organizations at the expense of religious ones. A senior official in an Egyptian Salafi party expressed surprise that even his party was eligible to receive training from U.S. organizations like the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute.

Obstacles to U.S. engagement. Despite recent U.S. efforts to engage with Islamists, including the Muslim Brotherhood, there are limits to how far such engagement can go. Washington and the American public are both focused on elections and the economy, and have little interest in adding nuance to what remain simplistic, totalizing understandings of Islam. Many – including within Congress – remain unable to distinguish between mainstream Islamists and “radical extremists.” The political costs of engaging with Islamists, particularly during an election year, may be too great; one participant warned of Republican efforts to portray Obama as “having lost the Arab Spring to the Islamists.” Many emphasized that engagement was too important to wait on a shift in the mood of the American electorate, while others said that a proactive approach on the part of groups like the Brotherhood could help, for instance by sending senior delegations to Washington as Al-Nahda did.

External pressure to safeguard transitions.

Many Arab participants argued that external powers should do more to safeguard transitions to democracy by putting pressure on authorities, namely SCAF. In the case of Egypt, U.S. representatives pointed to efforts by Congress to make military aid conditional on SCAF “not impeding the transition” but also said that the aid itself was an important source of influence. Among the Egyptians present, there was widespread support for more strict conditionality attached to military aid, as well as for redirecting some of that assistance to civilian projects. SCAF was widely described as the greatest threat to democratic transition in Egypt. It was emphasized that any such conditions should not extend to civil society support.

ABOUT THE BROOKINGS DOHA CENTER

Based in Qatar, the Brookings Doha Center is an initiative of the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., and undertakes independent, policy-oriented research on socioeconomic and geopolitical issues facing Muslim-majority states and communities, including relations with the United States.

Research and programming are guided by the Brookings Doha Center International Advisory Council, chaired by H.E. Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr Al Thani and co-chaired by Brookings President Strobe Talbott. Salman Shaikh, an expert on the Middle East peace process as well as state-building efforts and dialogue in the region, serves as Director.

In pursuing its mission, the Brookings Doha Center undertakes research and programming that engages key elements of business, government, civil society, the media and academia on key public policy issues in the following three core areas: (i) Democratization, political reform and public policy; (ii) Emerging powers in the Middle East; (iii) Conflict and peace processes in the region.

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