



POLICY BRIEF

Prospects for democracy in the Middle East: An interview with Salam Fayyad

Interview by Bruce Jones

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Eight years after the Arab Spring, the international community needs to invest in the process of democratization, rather than obsess over its outcomes.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In an interview with Brookings Vice President and Director of Foreign Policy Bruce Jones on February 26, 2019, Distinguished Fellow and former Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad discusses the prospects for democracy in the Arab world eight years after the Arab Spring uprisings. Noting that the Arab Spring is far from over, Fayyad urges the international community to invest in the process of democratization, rather than obsess over the outcome of democracy. He calls upon the international financial institutions to push Arab governments to improve their governance and work for the people. In a rapidly changing global environment, Fayyad reflects on the challenges and potential opportunities posed by a rising China and the spread of new technologies.

BRUCE JONES: Dr. Fayyad, it's been eight years since the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 and the region is still experiencing turmoil. Libya, Syria, and Yemen are in civil war, Egypt under military dictatorship. Even Tunisia is dealing with serious disillusionment with the democracy that it has. Is there still hope for democracy in the Middle East?

SALAM FAYYAD: In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, there is of course ample reason for disillusionment and serious worry. But I think it'd be wrong to say, based on this experience—as horrific as it has been—that this is pretty much over and that not much good can come out of what happened in 2010-11 and the kind of mobilization that took place.

Where I would qualify that account is in two areas. First, the scale of the horror, death, and destruction that has taken place and continues to take place in

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the region makes eight years seem like a very, very long period of time. But in the bigger scheme of things, was it reasonable to expect transformations to a democratic model to occur this quickly?

Second, remember that there were many experienced scholars who thought that democratization was not going to happen because the Arab world was run by regimes with built-in resilience. They stayed on for a long period of time and a lot went into making them resilient in the face of change and demands for change.

I think the reaction of the regimes to the initial uprisings shaped the destructive trajectory that followed. Syria is an obvious example. The brutality with which the Bashar al-Assad regime's security services dealt with young people in Daraa for writing some graffiti was the trigger by which completely nonviolent demonstrations and a completely peaceful process turned into the foreign intervention and terrible war that ensued.

But I would say we are far from the end of the Arab Spring. There continue to be significant mass mobilizations and eruptions. I don't see anything to suggest that we are anywhere near the end because the fundamental problems that drove people to the streets have not even been dealt with. Not long ago, for example, there was significant mobilization in Morocco, though it was not widely reported. The same can be said about more recent mobilizations in Sudan and Algeria. So, to the region's autocrats, who are too eager to talk about the Arab Spring as a thing of the past, I would say: Not so fast. What began in 2011 is not over, not by a long shot.

Another significant factor is the extent to which people's expectations have been altered by the reality of them being so connected to the world through social media, particularly young people in the region. People knew then and they certainly know now what it means to be a respected citizen in one's own country. People started to get a sense of what a responsible and responsive government is, in terms of being in service of the governed, not

the other way around. They had grown up thinking, and were made to believe, that their primary duty in life was to wake up every day thanking the Lord for having bestowed upon them the blessing of the infinite wisdom of their leaders—totalitarian leaders, as a matter of fact. People have come to the point of saying that it should not be this way, and that sentiment is not going to go away any time soon.

BRUCE JONES: As you said, there was resilience in many of these regimes. But what led some of them to face challenges in 2011 in the first place?

SALAM FAYYAD: These regimes relied on a social contract that had, at its center, a ruler who is the primary, if not the sole, provider for the well-being of people in a material sense, in return for their political quiescence. That was the prevalent social contract that was financed by the regions' massive wealth in oil producing countries, but also in non-oil exporting countries that benefited from remittances of their nationals who worked in those oil producing countries, as well as aid and some investment flows from the region's oil exporters.

Eventually something happens: You keep on hiring people in the government despite reduced oil-related income, and you eventually run out of fiscal space. Even as the oil continued to flow, it was not enough because the labor force was expanding enormously given the youthful demographic profile of the region. To this day, more than 50 percent of the region's population are under 25 years old.

Subsidies—another prevalent feature of the social contract—also became very difficult to sustain. Oil income was not sustainable because oil markets suffered on several occasions from a combination of factors that eventually weakened confidence in the capacity of oil income to continue to sustain these kinds of social contracts. So strains were beginning to appear first in oil importing countries, and since 2014, also in oil exporting countries.

BRUCE JONES: How much did the global financial crisis and the fall in resource prices play into the Arab Spring?

SALAM FAYYAD: The region's memory has tended to be short on this matter. Back in the mid-1980s, when there was a massive decline in oil prices, there was a lot of worry. Even though that was a disastrous turn of events, as soon as oil prices started to recover, governments went back to their old ways. Even when they had to make adjustments, they tended to do so by cutting spending that were easy to cut, namely capital expenditures. That had no real impact on the fundamental social contract I was talking about.

Around the time of the global financial crisis, there was some thinking that just as the fundamental nature of the social contract had survived bad times before, it would again. That was part of the reason for the massive failure to predict the Arab Spring, not only on the part of the rulers of the region, but also economists, social scientists, political scientists, and observers, who thought, "Don't worry, we have seen this before, nothing is going to change here."

I can go even further. In the immediate aftermath of the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia, not even the Tunisian regime itself thought of it as a big deal. It was not unheard of for people from time to time to express their discontent. The president himself was not moved at all. It took him some time before he decided, "Well maybe I should be seen as having visited this poor guy." He started out basically in complete denial. Then it was, "Well, I understand your pain." But all of this was too little, too late. This sequence played out similarly in Egypt, too.

BRUCE JONES: You talked earlier about the power of social media and technology to empower and inform the people. But there are also flows of technology to authoritarian and totalitarian states that help them control the people. Are you worried about that?

SALAM FAYYAD: Yes, there are examples of that certainly in the region, but the more notable example is what's reported in China, the extensive use of technology for surveillance. Technology can be a force for good or bad and sometimes even evil.

However, my take on this is more optimistic. I don't dismiss the risks of technology being at the disposal of authoritarians to suppress and oppress more effectively. But I'd like to believe that a greater diffusion of technology will make it more likely that societies can transform a spark—a democratic opening—into a real transition to democracy. With technology becoming accessible to more and more segments of Arab society, including to those with meager resources, the region is going to be in a much better position to handle that transition.

A society that is better prepared in terms of, to borrow an expression from Condoleezza Rice, democracy's scaffolding—the institutions, civil society, and technology diffusion—stands a much better chance to turn a spark into a progression toward democratic stability and order, as opposed to an explosion of the kind that happened in our region.

BRUCE JONES: So we don't know when the next spark will occur, but do you have some ideas about some steps that you would take now to improve the chances of positive transformations?

SALAM FAYYAD: We need to invest in democratization as a process, rather than obsess over democracy as an outcome. The outcome is so incredibly fascinating when you think about it, but to me, even more so is the process of democratization. You know when I was a graduate student in the United States, I used to watch a lot of C-SPAN and I was fascinated by the workings of democracy in this country. I was captivated by moments of elections and swearing-in of presidents, the regularity with which it happened.

I yearn for the day when the hundreds of millions of people in the Middle East can enjoy the brilliance of living as free people with dignity in their own

countries, but that's more like an outcome. The real challenge is the process of getting there. It's never easy.

Here we are in this great country. I have just told you how fascinated I was at noon on the 20th of January every four years when somebody's hand is on the Bible being sworn in to the presidency. But the road to get there, can anyone say it was easy? The foundations of this country go back to days when not all people counted as whole persons. There was a civil war. Women couldn't vote 100 years ago. Massive changes happened, but they were very slow.

People tend to forget how long the process took and they begin to take democracy for granted. I find all of this incredibly fascinating. But the fundamental point is that it did not happen overnight. Nor did it happen overnight in places like France, for example. Authoritarian relapses happen all the time, but now it may feel as though they are happening everywhere!

With that in mind, while continuing to hold democracy as an ideal or outcome, why not get on with the process to turn government into an instrument for the good of the people it's supposed to govern? Why not create a government *for the people*, even if not yet *of* the people or *by* the people? The latter two—of the people and by the people—are non-starters for any conversation with rulers in the region, to be honest with you. But a government for the people, nobody can push back against that. There's no justification for holding off on doing the right thing and improving governance in the region. And that provides an opening.

Now, do I have any real guarantee that once we get on this train, it's going to take us to blissful democracy anytime soon? Definitely not. Maybe we'll never get there. Maybe we'll get to something that does not look exactly like democracy in the United States or in India. If you think about it, none of these democracies is exactly identical to the others. Nor was any of them frozen in time. Each of

them is constantly changing and evolving.

What if we end up with something that is definitely not authoritarian, but also not quite a full-fledged democracy? You could call it an "Aramocracy"—an Arab democracy—that has key elements of accountability and consent by the governed, but is not necessarily in the exact image of other democracies.

Of course, on good days, I'd like to believe that this will not be the final destination, but it would still leave the region with a substantial improvement over what we have now. Lives are at stake; human dignity is at stake. Is it wise for us to not seek to attain those improvements along what might be a very long path to freedom, just because we cannot get there tomorrow? That is my submission, and again, it's not theory, it's not science, it definitely is not implying causality, no matter how weak. But with so much at stake, nothing will come close to persuading me that we shouldn't try because we are unsure about the exact chain of relationships involved. In this particular case, plausibility should be enough of a motivation to act.

BRUCE JONES: The phrase that comes to mind when I hear you speak is a kind of "mobilization of spirit" that is necessary, irrespective of how a mobilization of people might eventually occur.

SALAM FAYYAD: Yes, absolutely. If you think about it, the process of change itself is empowering and generates a new dynamic. You're no longer looking through the frame of a static world view. Along the way, you are inspired and you inspire others. People begin to have a sense of what could be possible.

This is so noble a cause, in my view, that is important to the livelihood and dignity of people because we were meant to be free. The notion that somehow you're beholden to a ruler for your survival undermines all basic elements of the concept of fundamental rights that I can think of. And that has to come to an end. I accept that this cannot happen immediately, but this process of

adjustment in our own thinking has to begin now. I find it naïve to think that the status quo can go on forever and that all we need to do is to shore up the social contract we had, a little bit here, a little bit there, and we could go on.

BRUCE JONES: What role do you see right now for the United States, for the broader West, and for the international financial institutions (IFIs) as a potential vector in this change?

SALAM FAYYAD: The IFIs—the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank—are the key players. They are instrumental institutions with quite a bit of influence in the way governments function. It is my preference that the process of promoting good governance be championed by the IFIs rather than foreign countries. It's different when you have the IFIs make the case for improving governance in countries around the world, particularly our region. People have come to view with suspicion agendas for reform, freedom, and justice promoted by the United States and the global West.

Secondly, these institutions are actually uniquely positioned and have the unique standing—technically and jurisdictionally—to engage on matters of good governance. That wasn't always the case, but since the early 1990s, these institutions started to talk about good governance. They now have the technical knowledge and expertise.

But it will require genuine modesty on everybody's part. It is an enormous challenge to acknowledge failures of the past. We can lament past inadequacies, but we must focus and develop some ideas as to how these failures can be avoided, and how we can enhance the chances of success.

BRUCE JONES: If you were talking to your Latin American colleagues, they would have a different view of the modesty of the IFIs.

SALAM FAYYAD: Yeah, sometimes they say, with good reason, "how can you possibly say all these things about the need for the IFIs to take the lead

role?" Look no further than the Middle East. There are some countries that have been adjusting and reforming for three or four decades with varying degrees of IFI involvement, and sometimes even praise. That by itself is evidence of failure on a massive scale.

But that is why I am not calling for an unqualified mandate for these institutions. They are my instrument of choice, but with some adaptations. And the world—not only the IFIs' key shareholders, but think tanks, civil society, and all—must play an important role in getting these two institutions to learn from past failures. They have to deal with a very heavy weight of institutional memory, useful in many ways but retardant in others. Modesty is definitely required to permit constructive contestation.

For instance, Tunisia is a very important story, and I think it was mishandled in some key ways. The country is said to be anomalously democratic in the Arab world. It has the unfortunate distinction of being the only Arab country designated as "free" by Freedom House, but as you rightly pointed out at the start, it's not a done deal.

We have this case that we say is so exceptional and marvelous, and the world is cheering for democracy and freedom in Tunisia. But what did the IFIs do when the time came to build the economic infrastructure that's needed, to bring about improvements in the well-being of the people? They recommended the same adjustment program that they would have recommended for Tunisia in 2005. If you look at the history, it was the more or less the same. That cannot be.

Tunisia now finds itself having to fix the ill effects of decades of shortcomings in economic management over a short period of time. There is no justification whatsoever to do this now. Fiscal adjustment is a very important issue, no doubt, but there's no compelling reason other than a lack of resources internationally for it to be done now.

For Tunisian officials to accept such conditions, I salute them. It takes a lot of courage to go to your people and say, “We cannot sustain a wage bill of this size.” But remember, that very large wage bill was the product of the complete dysfunctionality and poor—but intentional—design in the social contract that was ultimately used to preserve and perpetuate authoritarian rule. And now you have a democracy that is expected to fix this overnight.

I think a more sensible approach to this is, without being dismissive of the need for adjustment, to phase the plan over a longer period of time. We must make more resources available in the earlier phases of this transformation for a better tomorrow, for Tunisia and its neighbors in the region and beyond. Tunisia needs a massive investment in infrastructure, particularly in remote areas. The spark of the uprising did not occur in the capital, but in the long-ignored areas. Why not invest in an adjustment and reform program that is built on a substantial front-loading of assistance and aid? Why not enable the government to invest in improving infrastructure and provision of basic needs in remote areas?

When Greece had its debt crisis, the international community moved. Key IFI shareholders stepped in and recognized Greece’s importance. But in reality, Greece’s GDP is no bigger than that of the city of Philadelphia. Why is it that the world was so inspired by the unfolding of a crisis, but not by the great promise of democracy in Tunisia? It’s a crying shame, it really is a crying shame.

It’s a reflection of inadequate understanding, maybe even recklessness, for the international community to recommend this. They should have said, “You’re a democracy, tell us how much you’ll need. We’ll put that money on the table.” This would not be free money, of course. There would have to be commitments by the government to involve people in decisionmaking. Leaders need to listen to what the people want and what their priorities are. That’s real democracy at work, or in the making. It’s precisely this favorable evolution that merits the kind of international support I’m talking about.

BRUCE JONES: Let me ask you a complicated question. The country with the most resources and most willingness right now to invest in infrastructure anywhere is China, but Beijing is not going to attach to that investment the kind of accountabilities that you want to see. The West would attach those accountabilities, but right now has very limited appetite and spare resources for this, maybe including Japan. Do you think it’s feasible to bring the Chinese into the infrastructure investment that you’re looking for, while retaining the kind of policy framework the IFIs would give? Or are you worried about that, and would you prefer to see this investment coming from the global West?

SALAM FAYYAD: It would be naïve to think that freedom is high on the agenda of China’s authoritarian regime, but there are two things I would say about this. One is inspired by the need to resist thinking that just because China is the way it is today—and it seems like it has forever been this way—that it’s going to be like this forever. Secondly, in fairness, China has not been pushing its brand of authoritarianism on anyone in the Middle East—not that it would have to try very hard in this region.

Right now, from Tunisia’s perspective, I’m democratizing alone, but I can use some outside support to succeed. I can’t go to China and talk it into supporting democracy in Tunisia; they couldn’t care less. As a recipient, I cannot dictate conditions. If it is China’s famous Belt and Road regional infrastructure initiative that we are talking about, I would look to see if there is a component that can respond to our needs, with China simultaneously thinking of it as something that is consistent with its interests. I need to be pragmatic about these things. I would not shut out the Chinese, but I would also not accept somebody effectively saying: “I will give you money, provided that you oppress and turn the clock back.” In this particular case, Tunisia should also be wary of debt-creating assistance, given its already highly constrained fiscal space.

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BRUCE JONES: “Sovereignty” in a good sense of the term.

SALAM FAYYAD: Yes, but Tunisia would need help with this. The role of the international community is absolutely important. Analysts, media, and think tanks are absolutely a space in which I would like to see a lot more activity and involvement. On its own, Tunisia may not be able to mobilize support, particularly from countries not too enthralled by democracy or democratization. But with serious conversations about this in the halls of power and influence, at international gatherings, at think tank-organized events, I don’t think that donors anywhere in the world can be too dismissive then.

I think it requires an appreciation of how enormously important this moment in history is. Sometimes we miss these things. I hope it’s not too late. But particularly against the backdrop of what seems to be a fully determined effort to legitimize an authoritarian relapse in the region, I believe it’s very important for someone to put their foot down and say, “Hey, there’s another way.”

BRUCE JONES: Thank you, Dr. Fayyad.

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