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Brookings Cafeteria Podcast
The next democracy debate in the Middle East: Democracy and Disorder Podcast Series
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(MUSIC)

TAUSSIG: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria Podcast. My name is Torrey Taussig and I am a nonresident fellow in the Center on the United States and Europe at Brookings. This episode on the Brookings Cafeteria Podcast is the third in a four-episode series called “Democracy and Disorder,” a new project in the Foreign Policy program that looks at critical challenges to democratic states and institutions in a new era of great power competition and offers ideas for what to do about them.

This episode focuses on democracy in the Arab world. The Arab Spring in 2011 sparked a new debate on the future of democracy in the region. Yet, in the years since, the Middle East has seen a return to civil war and proxy warfare—most violently in Syria. In the region as a whole countries today are still searching for a new democratic narrative on the post Arab Spring environment while they navigate democratic and economic downturns, crackdowns, and the occasional bright spots, including a still nascent democracy in Tunisia.

To discuss the challenges and opportunities for democracy in the post-Arab Spring Middle East, in particular the Arab world, I am here with two contributors to the project and fellows at Brookings. First, we have Salam Fayyad, a distinguished fellow in the Foreign Policy program at Brookings. He is also the former prime minister of the Palestinian Authority where he served from 2007 to 2013.

We also have with us here today Sharan Grewal, a postdoctoral research fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings. His research examines security studies, democratization, and political Islam in the Arab world with a focus on Egypt and Tunisia. So, thank you both for being here with us today.

FAYYAD: Pleasure.

TAUSSIG: So, Salam, I'd like to go to you first. Take us back to the Arab Spring movements that set the context for today and that which roiled the region in 2011. What do you see as the primary causes behind these Arab Spring movements?

FAYYAD: Well, thank you for having me on the show here. Let me first say that, as a matter of fact, a lot has been written on this by way of trying to find an explanation as to why what happened happened when it did happen. And, honestly, all of this against the backdrop of not many having expected the eruption when it occurred, not in Tunisia itself, even after the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi. People did not think that was going to really end up being what it ended up being in Tunisia itself, much less in other countries in the region.

So, this was, in many ways, a major predictive failure. Although people at the time were looking at the combination of economic outturns at the macro level, macroeconomic level. They were also looking at elements of strength and resilience of existing regimes, arguing they had such a high degree of resilience. That form of government was going to last a long period of time. So, it was big surprise, actually, when this happened and mushroomed in the way it did.

A lot went into trying to explain why it happened, and to me it's—and this is pretty much a matter of consensus—a combination of economic and political factors, discontent and resentment, political oppression, state tyranny and rule on the one hand, and economic outturns which while at the macro level in some countries looked to be okay they had years of slow growth, modest growth. Certainly nothing to write home about in none of these countries. Declining living standards, and most important,

deepening of income disparities in many of those countries. Deep sense of disenfranchisement and exclusion, if you will, all happening against the backdrop of progressively more and more open world. So, you had that kind lethal combination, you had the outcome of that to be an event. It appears to have been a reflection of great deal is resentment and discontent for both economic and political reasons. I mean, the two realms interacted to really produce the outcome in the way it happened.

TAUSSIG: So clearly these political movements, citizens taking to the street, were a culmination of governments not meeting citizens' expectations for both political and economic reasons.

FAYYAD: Yes.

TAUSSIG: So, Sharan, turning to you, these political movements didn't take place in a bubble, and what happened on the streets of many of these Middle Eastern capitals also affected the way that authoritarian regimes responded. What do you see as the primary signals that these Arab Spring movements and protests sent to autocrats in the region about the dangers that democratic movements pose to their own stability and rule?

GREWAL: So, when the uprising in Tunisia succeeded and ousted Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the Tunisian president, it sent a message to protestors around the region that maybe this is possible in our countries too. But as you mentioned, it also sent a message to autocrats around the region that we need to figure out a way to avoid collapse. And so, some autocrats learned how to weather the storm.

And so, you saw, for instance, in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies that they were able to draw up on their oil wealth and provide economic concessions very quickly

and large enough to satisfy the protestors. So, you saw Saudi Arabia, for instance, allocate some 10 billion in salary increases and subsidy increases.

Other monarchs, such as in Morocco and Jordan, couldn't rely on their oil wealth, as they did not have any, so they had to rely instead on political concessions. So, you saw in Morocco and Jordan that they learned to get ahead of the protests by initiating constitutional reforms to hold relatively competitive elections. And even in Morocco those elections led to an opposition party coming to power, an Islamist party, and forming the governments. So those monarchs were able to survive through that combination of oil wealth and the structural advantage of being able to even allow an opposition party to come to power in a monarchy in a way that didn't threaten the king, as he didn't have a ruling party that he needed to continue winning. He would allow an opposition party to win.

The republics, on the other hand, didn't have either of those, the oil wealth or that monarchical advantage, so they had to learn in a different way which was, for the most part, to rely on repression as opposed to concessions. So, for instance, in Syria and Bahrain you saw the autocrats instead turn to their militaries to try to repress and crush these protestors. And you saw similar attempts in Libya and Yemen, but in those cases those militaries fractured leading more to civil war than to autocratic survival as in Syria and Bahrain. In Egypt and Tunisia, the concessions were not great enough and their military sided with the protestors in the end, ultimately dooming those dictators.

TAUSSIG: I remember at the time a big part of these protests was the use of technology. These were considered the Facebook-inspired revolutions. Everyone on the streets was on their cell phones coordinating meetings points, and at the time

technology was seen as advancing the will of the people. Do you see technology as playing an enhancing role of the power of the autocratic regimes in the region as well?

GREWAL: Absolutely. I mean, the autocrats also learned to use social media to their advantage, right. On the one hand, it sends a message also to the autocrats of where their protests are going to be. On the other hand, it leads autocrats to repress, to censor Facebook, Twitter, and social media generally. So, I mean, the autocrats were able also to learn that we need to do something about social media in a way that they haven't before.

TAUSSIG: So, to flash forward to present day, skip ahead eight years. It has been eight years since the Arab Spring movements rocked the Middle East and the Arab world and there is a narrative which says that the Arab Spring was a time of euphoria and hope, a time when leaders such as President Obama said the Arab Spring was a moment when the Egyptian people have spoken. Their voices have been heard.

Other commentators said Egypt will never be the same. And in the years since this hope has eroded into a reality of cynicism and disappointment. Parts of the region are a seemingly endless state of upheaval and turmoil. Salam, do you agree with this narrative? This narrative of hope to cynicism or what is it missing? Why should people maintain hope about the prospects for democracy in the region?

FAYYAD: It is missing investing in the process of democratization. It is reflective of a lot of obsession with democracy as an outcome, not democratization as a process. So, when you really look at this trajectory of events in the way you described it, it's hard to disagree with the disappointment, obviously, to say the very least, if not outright disillusionment with what happened relative to the euphoric days of early 2011,

particularly early on. And considering the depth of destruction, suffering, and tragedy, and killing in several parts of the region definitely it's not surprising to see people come to the conclusion that this is really very problematic, to say the very least.

I have to say that, as a matter of fact, this kind of sentiment was something that some tried to, in a way, exploit to suggest that this business about people power, we as Arabs are not suited for this kind of thing. This kind of thing being democracy, in some way we told you so. Much rather got to focus on continuing to be stable as opposed to being democratic and having system of government that's really based on separation powers, government of the people, by the people, for the people, consent by the govern, separation of powers and what have you.

In fairness, some countries have some of that, but can we really say that democracy in a way that lives up to those aspirational ideals to the extent that has erupted in several other places around the world for a long period of time? And in many countries that were long thought to not be hospitable to this kind of evolution or change in the direction of democratization. Clearly there is a lot to be desired, but my conclusion is that when you say this is it and really, it's time to kind of really forget about it and move on. This has been nothing but trouble, so to speak, it is reflective of a high-degree of obsessing over democracy as an outcome, not choosing to invest in what cannot be, but a very long and high arduous journey toward freedom and democracy.

TAUSSIG: And sometimes you see the question being posed that it's a question either of democracy or stability in the Middle East.

FAYYAD: Yeah. This is a poor choice.

TAUSSIG: Right.

FAYYAD: It is really stated and it's a point that continues to be made as a matter of fact for a long period of time, not only in the region and in the immediate vicinity of it, but internationally that, yes, I mean, these countries and the world run in a certain way that is not similar to the way we like to do business in our own countries. I'm talking about the global West here, the United States, Europe, et cetera. But that's the way they choose to do business and that's fine so long as they are stable, so long as they continue to be relevant in a positive way to our political influence. What is it to us? And it would be, too, what is it to you anyway if we are to really be doing things not in a way that lives up to the ideals that you consider to be important to your countries?

That pretty much was the way in which we are looked at, and a lot of explanations or attempts at explaining this, ranging from the nature of the regimes. The way they are really built up, their heavy reliance on security services to help preserve and perpetuate them. The kind of social contract long perceived to have existed in their world in the post-Colonial Era. An authoritarian bargain, if you will, in which the ruler is at the center of the system, and he is the source of all of the benefits to the people. Now those benefits typically meant government jobs, subsidies, and so on and so forth.

In return for people coalescing to being shut out of decision-making on matters that pertain to their faith, including especially in the political sphere, that proves to be really totally unsustainable. That probably was a key contributor to the implosion, essentially, to the eruption that really actually has happened. The unsustainability of this kind of social contract in the region.

Which if I may go back to a point that you raised earlier about why in some countries and not others. A lot has gone in to trying to really explain differences, and

some on the basis of which are unsaid about some countries being monarchies, hereditary rule, and others being a republic. Through every theory or set of stylized facts there is an exception, even in this small set of countries. As a matter of fact, Libya is a republic, was and still is a republic, not a monarchy, and it also meets the label of having a lot of oil wealth, but, look, it turned out to be a disaster.

Conditions in Libya are different from other countries. There was, in the case of Libya, external intervention that really actually was decisive in the way things ended up happening. There are other factors that may have been at play here. The role of the military, for example. In Tunisia and in Egypt the military states and the barracks did not really actually move to support the regimes. In Syria, to a large extent, that was the case for actually in there. And Libya that also happened to an extent. Some in Yemen, but not completely.

It maybe also that the matter in which regimes responded, the security services responded. Key example that comes to mind is Syria. I don't know the counterfactual is really, to be honest with you, but a lot of people buy into the theory that had the security services not acted in the brutal manner that they acted in Dura—vis-à-vis youngsters, actually, against the backdrop of writing some graffiti on the walls—that what were peaceful demonstrations would have ended up being just that and nothing more. In other words, the reaction to the reaction is something that one needs to bring into the conversation as well.

TAUSSIG: Sharan, picking up on how some of these countries have evolved since the time of the Middle East, in some instances the Arab Spring succeeded in toppling some dictators, in other instances these movements did not. In the four

countries that did see dictators toppled, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, why do you think that they've ended up so different today?

GREWAL: So, part of it has to do with the militaries in each of those countries, as Salam mentioned. So, in Libya and Yemen you had very divided societies and divided militaries. So, Gadhafi, for instance, had privileged his tribe, the Qadhadhfa Tribe in some of the units. For instance, the 32nd Brigade and the Republican Guard, and so those unit stayed loyal to him in 2011 until the very end, but other units had split off as they were representing different tribes.

Similarly, in Yemen, you saw units that Ali Abdullah Saleh had put his family and his clan into. Those units stayed loyal to him while others had defected. So, in those two countries, very divided societies, and ultimately, divided militaries that allowed both sides to be armed which contributed to the civil war in both of those cases.

Egypt and Tunisia, on the other hand, are relatively homogenous societies, 90 percent Sunni Muslim and 98 percent Sunni Muslim, respectively. And their militaries, as well, were relatively representative of their populations. And so, you didn't see that same sort of civil war outcome in those cases. But in those cases, as well, the type of military that those democracies had inherited from their previous regimes, from autocracy also shaped those outcomes as well. So, Egypt falls to a military coup because the military that democracy in Egypt was inheriting was one that had been the center of power for 50 years. And so, democracy encroached upon that position of the military.

So, you see the newly elected government led by the Muslim Brotherhood try to make some national security decisions that the military disagreed with. They wanted, for

instance, to negotiate rather than fight with the militants in the Sinai. They were actually quite aggressive towards Syria and Ethiopia in a way that caused friction with the military. And so, the military, upon seeing that democracy meant that they would not have their monopoly over control on national security policy led the military in Egypt to say, hey, democracy is not for us and provided the grievances for a coup.

You saw the total opposite story in Tunisia where you had a very weak and neglected military under autocracy that actually saw its power increased under democracy. The Tunisian military saw its budget increase more quickly than any other ministry under democracy. You saw the military have, for the first time, political influence in the form of a military advisor to the president, in the form of representation in the national security council. You saw new weapons, new helicopters, and new patrol boats for the first time in 20 years. So, this Tunisian military had long been neglected and marginalized, but now saw its fortunes improve under democracy, which I argue wedded it to democracy.

So, one important factor in terms of explaining these outcomes is the type of military that each of these transitions were inheriting from the previous regime. Other factors, for instance, in trying to explain why Tunisia succeeded, I mean, the Islamists that you had in Tunisia were much more willing to compromise and make concessions to the opposition. In addition, you had a very strong civil society in Tunisia that brokered the negotiations between the Islamists and the secularists. So, there were a number of structural advantages that Tunisia had going into democracy that helps to explain why it has become the one success story.

TAUSSIG: And to follow up on Tunisia, as you mentioned, it has a more

successful story than what we've seen in Egypt, and yet, it is still a nascent democracy, still vulnerable to backsliding. What do you see as the threats to democracy still remaining in Tunisia, and do you think it is likely to consolidate further?

GREWAL: So, democracy in Tunisia has provided the political freedoms that Tunisians were demanding, but thus far it's failed to provide the economic demands that the Tunisians were protesting for. The economy, by almost every metric is even worse than it was in 2011 that led to the revolution, in terms of unemployment, in terms of inflation, in terms of tourism. All of the numbers actually are worse today than they were in 2011, and as a result of that Tunisians have become disillusioned with democracy as a solution to their problems.

If you look at surveys today the majority of Tunisians actually oppose democracy. It's only about 46 percent who still think that democracy is preferable to other forms of government. And so, the danger for Tunisia today is that a populist strongman might emerge to capitalize on that disillusionment, to win an election on rhetoric that we will dismantle democracy, go back to the security and stability that we had before, the economic growth that we had before. And so that I think is the big danger that there could be some strongman who comes to power and dismantles democracy from within.

The other issue is that that potential strongman would face little resistance in the sense that the democratic institutions that have been set up are not very strong at the moment. If you look at the judiciary, for instance, there's still no constitutional court that would help to reign in a future strongman. If you look to the parliament it has very low capacity. It's struggling not only to draft laws, but to review the laws that are sent to it from the government. And so, neither the legislature nor the judiciary could do much to,

I think, rein in a future strongman. So, the danger, I think, is there. That is the threat. A future strongman being elected as opposed to, for instance, Tunisia falling to civil war or a military coup.

TAUSSIG: And do these dangers and current disillusionment among people in Tunisia say anything about the prospects for democratization elsewhere in the region? Countries such as Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon?

GREWAL: Absolutely. If Tunisia were to succeed, to have not only a strong democracy but thriving economy, that would send a message elsewhere in the region that actually democracy is possible and can deliver as well economically. But I think already you're continuing to see the Arab Spring come back in the sense that you are seeing in the last year alone relatively large protests in Morocco, in Oman, today in Algeria. And so, in that sense the Arab Spring is not quite over. And so, there's still hope the demands and the grievances of these protestors have not been resolved, and so you're still seeing those demands manifest themselves into protests just like you did in 2011.

TAUSSIG: Right. And democracy does not happen overnight, revolutions do not happen overnight, so in many ways the Arab Spring could be considered the beginning of a movement that will take years, decades, to continue, and will continue to play out.

Looking ahead in the prospects for good governance and democratization in the region, Salam, you have argued in the past that as a segue to addressing requirements of democratization in the Arab world we must first address the requirements of improving good governance in the region which could eventually lead to enhanced prospects for democracy. What do you mean by this? What are elements of good

governance that can feasibly be advanced and improved upon? And, particularly, how you saw this play out in your time as prime minister of the Palestinian Authority?

FAYYAD: Well, thank you for that. I'm really happy with moving the conversation forward in terms of what can possibly be done about the situation. The kind of conversations that we've been having so far is useful to really examine factors that, A, have contributed to the uprising to begin with in late 2010, early 2011 subsequently. And, B, try to explain the differing trajectories in different countries after that eruption and see the prospects, basically, of where do we go from here, including countries like Tunisia.

Let me, before getting to the question about what to do, reinforce the point that Sharan made about economic conditions in Tunisia, and also take issue, a little bit, if I may, not take an issue, but try to shed some light. That's really more in the nature of what I want to do on disillusionment with lack of economic progress contributing to the emergence of yet another strongman somewhere in the Arab world, none other than Tunisia.

Two things. First, yes, economic outcomes have been extremely disappointing, and this is an opportunity for me to really actually try to shed light on the important role which can be played by external forces, countries, organizations, institutions to intervene in a way that could be helpful. An example of exactly the kind of thing that was not done in Tunisia.

Here is a country that has just undergone this transition with the greatest of difficulty and pain, adjustments and all. And in the process, in a way, at least so far has been the notable exception to what otherwise is a very gloomy picture, just about

everywhere else you look in the Arab world. And, yet, here it is, the current government or the government right before it, whatever, is expected to deal with all of the ills on the fiscal side of the house that were the product of decades of abuse, of decades of mismanagement. Now and immediately.

I think a major opportunity is being missed here. I have seen the world respond a lot more generously inspired by fear of the crisis spilling over elsewhere in the world. Most recently evidenced by, for example, Greek crisis and all the extent to which the world was mobilized, international institutions, EU, and the rest of it. You compare that kind of reaction to the way in which the international community has responded, at least so far, to Tunisia's needs it shows really a major distance between the international community acting inspired by fear of a crisis and the spillover, as opposed to inspired by the promise of successfully democratic transformation in a country like Tunisia with all that could come with that on the positive side. It's really tragic when you look at how miniscule the amount of foreign aid that Tunisia has been getting.

This is an example of a case where, yes, fiscal adjustment is needed, but no one says it has to happen now. They should be expected to put their economy or fiscal books on the path of convergence eventually, take five, six, seven years and we'll give them a little bit of room now. Let them focus on issues of governance and building institutions of government that are capable of acting democratically.

And a second point on this, and this a role of government, government should not really by shy, including country like Tunisia, in arguing to the people that, yes, even democracies go through recessions. I mean, this whole notion that somehow that you have democratic transformation and so therefore we have immediate prosperity and the

rest of it when, you know, doesn't stand to the test of any kind of scrutiny if you look to the record international, obviously.

I mean, if democratization immunizes against recession, I think that would be a strong reason for countries to really focus their regimes to move quickly in the direction of democratization. But that's really not the case. It's difficult for countries in transformation, for their leadership, to be able to kind of face the crowd with this kind of argument, but it's as part of the learning that has to go into building democratic culture and tradition. The expectation of less than good, less than expected performance, and all for these reasons. But it's really a lot more about involving people in that kind of real analysis, as opposed to promising them things that really cannot be expected to obtain, at least not in the short term. Governments, including Tunisia, should be a lot more open about the risks and challenges that lie ahead than all of us will think, involve people in this kind of really thinking.

So, this is what I really wanted to say about these two things. And while we are quickly commenting on the way different regimes acted with some of them having chosen to kind of spend their way out of a tight spot, so to speak, it is thought to have generally worked, but I would say think again. Is it not plausible that when countries' governments, when they are perceived to be under pressure, all of a sudden act generously? Wouldn't that be an invitation to kind of lead people to demand more? So, the fact that it may appear to have worked is a question of analysis. I'm not really certain that one can really invest too much. Nor is it advisable, to be honest with you, to invest in a thesis like this too much for a variety of reasons. A, it may not be true. B, actually the exact opposite could be true in the sense of when you're holding back, you're not

giving the salary increases or increasing the subsidies or whatever it is on the goods side that you're doing right now. Now that you're under pressure you're doing this for not just say what you can do if only we kind of raise the ante a little bit. All of this really takes me back to the fundamental point which I hope we'll be able to focus on throughout the rest of what remains of this conversation, which is what do we do with all of this?

I think it's well and good to continue to analyze because that cannot really but improve our capacity to look at things, so we are better prepared to deal with things when they happen, particularly, unexpected developments. They try to really somehow find reasonable explanations as a basis for action going forward. But while all of this debate and conversation continues, I think it's important for us to really begin to focus on that which can be done right now.

I don't think you can, as you rightly said, Torrey, go over this democratic transformation overnight. It did not happen anywhere, as a matter of fact. Nor is it really fair or reasonable to damn the Arabs as a region, as a culture, so to speak, as being incapable of being both democratic and stable at the same time simply because here we are eight years after the eruptions of 2011. We are in such a huge state of upheaval and misery as if it's really over. By no means is it over, to be honest with you. Where else in history or other parts of the world did the evolution produce a stable democracy overnight?

TAUSSIG: Right. And nor, perhaps is it realistic to expect …

FAYYAD: It's not …

TAUSSIG: … a government to deal with decades of mismanagement, to, you

know, ease the promises that have been made.

FAYYAD: That reality ought to be explained and talked about, to be honest with you, to people, and involved them in this kind of, really, thinking. So, I say, while all of this happening let's really focus on improving governance in the region. I happen to believe that while good governance and democracy are not necessarily two sides of the same coin, I believe they have in common a lot of instruments and methods, if you will, to the point where if you actually focus on trying to improve governance in the region you tend to enhance the process of democratization.

Carefully choosing the words here because I do not want to, really, in any way imply a sense of direct causality or certainty to this being an outcome. All I'm really saying is that if we focus on the need to improve governance in the region—and God knows there is a a huge good governance deficit in the region, there's no question about it, just as there is a huge freedom deficit in the region, there's no question about that either—can we do something, I ask, about this huge governance deficit in the region? That is necessary in and of itself, but I argue that on the strength of getting it right in that sphere we may aid the effort in democratizing the region which requires that we think about democracy, again, as a process as opposed to a just simply an outcome of something like this.

TAUSSIG: And to pick up on this thread thread of enhancing good governance in the region as opposed to focusing on broader democracy trends, Salam, you've spent part of your career working at the International Monetary Fund, and we've talked in this discussion about the unrealistic nature of expecting some of these governments to deal with decades of mismanagement and turn these economies around overnight. Do you

see a role for international institutions such as the IMF in enhancing good governments in the area, for example, of public finance? Not really an issue we talk about as much when it comes to democracy, but as part of your thesis a critical aspect of improving good governance?

FAYYAD: Well, my focus on the need to work on improving governance throughout the region, it should not come as a surprise that I definitely would see a key role for both institutions, the IMF and the World Bank, in this sphere, in the main, in the area of aiding the effort to improve governance. There's no question. There's no question about that. That's notwithstanding the fact that this involvement on the part of these international financial institutions in adjustment and reform efforts—not only in the Arab world, but elsewhere in the world—has not been uniformly successful, to say the very least, if I may put it this way.

Nevertheless, I believe these institutions, in particular, happen to have the standing both technically and jurisdictionally to play the kind of role that I have in mind when it comes to trying to improve governance, partly because they are inter-governmental agencies, so countries are represented in them at the level of their governments, their official organizations and all. So that's a forum where we can engage governments on the discussion on the need to improve governance and how to do it, and to, basically, evaluate its implementation in order that this is what they really do. They did not start with this kind of mission. They're role evolved over time to where improving governance has become more and more central to their mandate and mission.

This history to getting here is long, there's no time to really get into this, but we

are where we are, and right now this is very relevant to the domain of activities. So definitely there is a strong case for getting them involved. But that also requires that as they approach the task of helping countries of the region in improving overall governance frameworks in various spheres of government and various sectors of government and the economy and all, that they be accepting of some adaptations to the way in which they do business.

What I have in mind here of things that are not necessarily big things, but slight adjustments in the way, you know, business is done. Keeping in mind the tension that tends to be inherently there when it comes to either of these institutions acting as a trusted advisor between transparency, on the one hand, confidentiality on the other, I think there's a great deal of room for these institutions to be a lot more explicit in their assessment of conditions, policies, adequacy thereof. They need to be more symmetrical in the way they express themselves on disappointments and failures, as opposed to successes and all.

Maybe they should be more clinical in the way they express themselves on assessment of progress and the evaluation progress and all of that sort of thing. All of this is important in trying to help on the governance side without risking not only the appearance, but maybe even the reality of conferring legitimacy on authoritarianism. That's a very significant risk here. It's very important. That is why I think it's really also important for there to be contestability along the way, not to really let things run for a very long period of time with the policies defended on all kinds of grounds, but then look at the region. I mean, virtually three decades of adjustment and reform, without really mentioning names of countries, some of these countries have been at it with IMF and

World Bank support for three decades. I mean, that by itself is prima facie evidence of failure. How can you possibly convince anybody, your own people, that you're adjusting and reforming if you have been at it for 30 years? Clearly, you've not been doing it. And along the way it would not surprise me in the least if, in fact, countries like that had gotten endorsements of their policies, encouragement, and expressions of positive assessment and all. And what do they have to show for it? Very little. That really has to change fundamentally, I believe, in order for these two institutions to play the kind of instrumental role they are capable of playing and furthering the goal of good governance which, as I argue, is a means or can act as a means of bringing about democratization or aiding the process of democratization.

TAUSSIG: One actor for change that we have not yet discussed in these processes of good governance and democratization in the Middle East is the United States, for better or for worse. Sharan, these transitions and these processes of good governance and democratization are not taking place in a vacuum, and as the Middle East and as the Arab world go through these transitions, we are seeing a change in the geopolitical context around them.

As the United States and the political west grow less influential in the coming decades and must contend with strategic challenges from authoritarian states, foremost among them Russia and China, how do you see this changing balance of power and influence affecting these processes of good governance, these processes of democratization in the Middle East?

GREWAL: So first let me address a couple of points that Salam made and then get to this question as I think it leads into it. So, on the first about, perhaps, what could

the U.S. have done to try to, and the west more generally have done to invest in Tunisia, for instance, as the democracy was failing to address those economic grievances? As Salam mentioned, there was very little economic aid. There wasn't any sort of Marshall Plan, and so you would not expect then to have this kickstarted economy and rapid economic growth that you had elsewhere, for instance, when new democracies started up in Europe.

So then part of what the U.S. could do is to invest more economically, but one other policy recommendation that emanates from my research which is looking at the militaries, for instance, in Egypt and Tunisia is more of a security recommendation for the U.S. which is that if the lesson we've learned from Egypt and Tunisia is that democracy is much more likely where you have civil-military relations like you had in Tunisia where you had a relatively weak, materially and politically, a relatively weak military.

Then the recommendation or the thought process must become how do we encourage autocrats to have militaries like Tunisia and not militaries like Egypt or Algeria or powerful militaries like in the Gulf. And so there the recommendation, I think, is that the U.S. and the West should provide effective security guarantees to these countries. So, for instance, in Tunisia they had, essentially, a security guarantee from France and later the U.S. to protect Tunisia from Gaddafi in Libya and from threats from Algeria such that Tunisia itself did not need to invest into its military. So, one recommendation is to have these security guarantees, for instance, against Iran so that the Gulf does not need to invest as much into their own militaries. They can rely on a credible promise from the U.S.

The flip side of that is that since they're relying on the U.S., the U.S. does not need to provide the military aid and the sales of military equipment to the Gulf which only allows those militaries to become more powerful in the first place. So, one recommendation then moving forward is to try to encourage more militaries to be like Tunisia rather than the military you would have in Egypt or some of the powerful ones in the Gulf.

TAUSSIG: Is there a risk, though, that as the United States does, perhaps, draw back, becomes less influential in the region, that a country like Russia which has invested a lot of military and political resources in the region becomes a more preeminent actor with a number of these autocratic regimes in the region? And do you see Russia playing a more influential role in that sense?

GREWAL: Absolutely. And so that is another reason why the U.S. needs to remain invested, not so much in terms of providing the aid and the military equipment, but in terms of providing security guarantee so that China or Russia, for instance, doesn't try to fill that role in a way that may encourage autocratic practices.

TAUSSIG: And, Salam, one great power authoritarian regime we haven't discussed yet in the region is China.

FAYYAD: Yeah.

TAUSSIG: It currently does not have a very present influence in the region, but that could change in coming years. Do you see China becoming a bigger part of the debate in the Middle East when it comes to presenting a powerful authoritarian economic model to governments that may wish to, as you were mentioning, advance economic might and prospects without giving up political control?

FAYYAD: They already be in conversation, that is China. Certainly, it's not their internal influence to the extent other key powers are and have been for a very long period of time. And more recently, as you mentioned, Russia has been reasserting its presence in the region after some years of being a way out of, kind of, direct involvement in all, but that position has changed dramatically. And China has been pursuing economic policies under the Belt and Road initiative virtually throughout and that can really be consequential in terms of it becoming more and more part of the debate, in terms of models of government that work and those that don't and those that kind of have reform, et cetera, et cetera.

I think a lot of people would be quick to point to China having been quite a success story in economic development, and would be eager, particularly in the region, to draw attention to the fact that, you know, it's an example of authoritarianism. And to, therefore, conclude that prosperity and economic progress are not inconsistent with authoritarianism, and to go as far as even suggesting that maybe, you know, authoritarianism is good for economic progress, development, and prosperity.

It's very hard to argue with the success that China has made in the economic sphere over the past 40 years or so. You cannot belittle the significance of the progress China has made in every conceivable facet of economic development and progress, including its resounding success in lifting no less than 700 million people, of its own citizens, out of poverty over that time period. I mean, this is something …

TAUSSIG: Stunning ….

FAYYAD: …that's severely absolutely major. And definitely to be taken note of. It's often the case that mistake is made because we are quick to draw inferences and

make associations and say, well, look at its model of government, it's authoritarian, so it therefore follows that if you are that way then you are going to really be able to replicate that experience and do the things which you have not been able to do so far.

Well, first of all, I mean, there are some who are peddling in this kind of theory, and it should not surprise anyone that many in our region, because we do not have shortage of defenders of the faith that is authoritarianism. I mean, that's really the prevalent government model, or governance model, with little exception throughout the regions, not to the same extent everywhere, but generally. Whether it's inherited rule or republican these countries have key common features of authoritarianism across the whole region.

So, there are some who really would be quick to the point to the virtues of authoritarianism. I think the mistake that people tend to make in this kind of analysis, it’s not different from the one they make when they say Arab Spring has failed. It's pretty much the same. China has not been always the way it is today, and China, to bet that China is forever more going to be what it has been over the past four years, or something like this, is something that I would hesitate before I would really buy into. Who knows? It may be a system that's going to really be able to sustain itself for decades more, but to say definitely that that is a sustainable way of getting to where our region really wants to go because we have this experience to really go by, you know, leaves something to be desired by this in my way of looking at things.

And, again, why should we accept falling in the trap of having to choose this or that? Why can't we possibly insist on it being a fundamental right for all peoples around the world to live as free people with dignity in their own countries? Why not? Just

because China has managed to succeed so impressively economically does not mean that this debate should be conceded. The quest for democracy should never be relinquished because it's about the promise of nothing less than human dignity, to be honest with you. That should not, in any way, be compartmentalized in the way that has been happening so far.

TAUSSIG: That is an excellent and resounding point to end this conversation on. And I would like to thank you both, Sharan and Salam, for joining us in the studio today, for this conversation on democracy and future governance trajectories across the Arab world.

GREWAL: Thank you for having me.

FAYYAD: Thank you very much. Thank you. Thanks.

(MUSIC)

TAUSSIG: You can find out more about the Democracy and Disorder project at Brookings.edu/democracyanddisorder. The Brookings Cafeteria Podcast is brought to you by the Brookings Podcast Network.

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Thanks for listening. I'm Torrey Taussig.