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Remarks on the Arab Spring Symposium, Fall 2012 - Prof. Patrick O'Malley

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REMARKS:

I will start by speaking of something that happened one day in Egypt. They went through many rounds of elections while we were there. That's essentially why I'm here tonight. I want to also thank George Weber for asking me, or identifying me as someone who spent a year in Egypt. I was part of the Multinational Force and Observers, the international force that has been organized to keep the peace between the Israelis and the Egyptians. It has been there since 1981. The United States (U.S.) sends a battalion of soldiers there every year. Last year was the Maryland National Guard's turn. So there I was. We worked with a lot of Egyptian civilians, and the Egyptian

military, on a day-to-day basis. There was an incident that illustrates one of the points I want to make.

Several of the contractors, whether they were mechanics or cafeteria workers, were named Mohammed. And after a while, to differentiate them to know who you were talking about, they took on the name of their jobs: one guy was 'Drive-Right Mohammed.' His job was to make sure the 'Drive-Right' system worked. The Drive-Right system made sure that we all drove twenty-five miles an hour and didn't kill ourselves out on the highways. So one of the Captains who did not get the message said to Drive-Right Mohammed, "Hey Mohammed, you must be really excited about the elections coming up. You're going to get a chance to vote. This is the first time you have ever voted, right?" "Yes, that is correct." "You must be pretty excited, right?"

--I have to point out that we were near in the Sinai where there are tourist areas. A lot of Italians and Russians visit the Sinai. There is a lot of diving—it is one of the great dive spots in the world if you can make it there. So the Captain said, "you must be very excited about the opportunity to vote." Mohammed said, "Ah yes. It's going to be great." "Why are you excited to vote?" "Well I think the country will be much better off—when we get rid of the *tourists*." "The *terrorists*? Yeah, nobody likes terrorists. Terrorists are bad." "No, no. The *tourists*! With their alcohol and their bikinis...they all must go!"

Mohammed is not an isolated individual. Up until this Arab Spring, Egypt made about \$14 billion a year in tourism. Two years ago, that was down to about \$8 billion. I believe it's still plummeting. You've got to imagine that Egypt is a country with 80 or 90 million people. There is not a lot of capital coming in. And yet, Mohammed is not alone in his sentiment. There are millions of people who

share his views. But, there are also millions of Egyptians who do not share his views.

The point I am trying to make is that Americans naturally want democracy. Whether we're on some Wilsonian quest, or we're just wishing this for other people, we want them to have our system. We want democracy all over the world. The problem is, when others finally get democracy, we get very upset at the people that they elect, once they have a choice.

Sixty years ago there was a debate in America: Who lost China? You know, which political party was responsible for losing China [to the communists]?

We have lost Egypt. Egypt was a strategic ally. People can argue, "Well we really haven't lost them." Maybe those people will prove to be right. But, it kind of passed without much comment, even in a presidential election year. There was some back-and-forth. The President said that Egypt was not an ally, and then I suppose one of his Ivy League staffers had to remind him that, yes, they are an ally. Be that as it may, they are, along with Israel, essentially the number one recipient of [U.S.] foreign aid—almost all of that is military.

Moving on...Hosni Mubarak, who was my neighbor until about August of 2011, lived in a hospital that, ironically, or maybe not ironically, was shaped like a pyramid just a couple of miles down the road from us. He was our guy. We gave him \$3 billion dollars every year for about thirty years. We had our troops stationed there. Now we're just moving that same \$3 billion, without any hesitation, to the new regime. One of the questions should be, "what are we getting for that?" It's not humanitarian aid. What are we getting for that?

Keep in mind too that Egypt and all these countries are not all one big mass. Egypt is a quarter of the Arab world, if you just go by population. If you go by where these young people go to college in the Arab world, it's much more important than that. It's very important. Cairo, as an intellectual center, is where people go to college, study medicine, etc. But it is also a great recruiting ground for al-Qaeda, and has been in the past. Egypt is central to any discussion about anything that purports to be an Arab Spring.

I disagree slightly with a little bit of history [regarding the Muslim Brotherhood]. There was an individual in the '60s named Sayyid Qutb, an influential leader of the Muslim Brotherhood. He is no longer with us. But to some extent, he was the intellectual godfather of what became al-Qaeda. He was executed eventually for his opposition to the Egyptian state and certainly he bears a lot of reading.

I would submit that the Muslim Brotherhood of the '50s and '60s never went away. Far from there being a power vacuum [when Mubarak was deposed], they were always poised to go [at any opportunity to achieve political power]. They have been recruiting through the good years, the bad years, the years when they were locked up, so I don't think that there has been a true vacuum. We are told that the Muslim Brotherhood is secular, and perhaps I'm wrong [that the Brotherhood is *not* secular] —I don't think I am—I guess time is going to tell.

Keep in mind again that seventy percent of Egypt's economy is run by Christians, Coptic Christians. It is important to note that they have a tiny minority of 8 million

people running the Egyptian economy. Keeping that in mind, we need to note that Egypt is both modern and medieval at the same time. It's most modern institution, for our purposes, for good or bad, are those Egyptian Armed Forces. The Camp David Accords, I submit, were one of America's greatest breakthroughs diplomatically. But, outside of the army and apart from two individuals named Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak, there is not tremendous popular support in Egypt from the common people for peace with Israel. Peace is a vital American interest.

I stand before you as something of an agnostic. I don't really believe there is an Arab Spring.

In January of 2011, an article appeared in Foreign Policy Magazine titled 'Obama's Arab Spring.' I would submit that, the term itself and, its prayer for success became associated with the Obama administration and its, now realized, reelection. Again, I'd submit that that term, like the President's first election, is something of a blank slate onto which we can project what we wish.

As an example, the initial Egyptian demonstration was organized through social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, which easily allowed Americans to think of cool kids in western clothing sipping Starbucks and listening to Coldplay, all the while texting each other quotes from JFK and Thomas Jefferson. I wish that had been entirely the case. Now I have no doubt, as was stated earlier, that the increasingly youthful demographics in Arab world contributed to instability. And I do not doubt for a minute that this part of the world is in dire need of change. It is. What I question is what type of change is possible and what kind of change we can expect. I start from a point of view that questions how interconnected these phenomena are in the ten different countries in which they're occurring.

The term “Arab Spring” works great as a marketing term. But we have to question what the true causes are in each country, where change is headed, and is it taking that country to a better or worse place. The other panelists have far more in-depth knowledge of some of those countries, and I look forward to learning from them as I already have. I am honored to be sitting, or at the moment standing, up here with them.

For those that can remember the South African experience, with dismantling apartheid and transitioning to democracy, one will recall that the end state was not guaranteed. Despite its brutal and racist past, South Africa did have certain legal and cultural traditions, as well as an incredibly forgiving and farsighted leadership, that created a path forward, in some measure, of genuine reconciliation. Those traditions, I would submit, are largely absent from the Arab world at this moment. Corruption, brutality, and violence—we were talking about the dictators and their sons before [in the prior discussion], but these [traits] are not a special privilege only of tyrants. The Libyan experience has hopefully taught some of us here in the U.S. that these conflicts are often bad guy against bad guy, despite whatever narrative the media gives us. That is not a new and unfamiliar situation for the U.S. abroad. Nor is the American self-delusion that “these people just want the same things we do.” That’s not new either. What *is* new is our inability to consider the consequences of our actions. At this point the American public is aware that our government armed and provided air cover for people we knew very little about, as my prior colleague just stated.

What you don’t know, but readers of Israeli newspapers do know, is that large stockpiles of weapons from that American adventure in Libya made it through underground tunnels, through Egypt, and into the Gaza

Strip. There, our new friends, who we knew very little about, fired on our old and, I would submit, our true friends.

Again, Bahrain or Syria can be seen as ethnic conflicts, in the sense that one group controls the country and oppresses all others. That is part of what leads me to be an agnostic as far as the Arab Spring [is concerned]. The price of bread had a lot more to do with the downfall of Hosni Mubarak than the image I painted of the young guys listening to Coldplay.

It is complicated and I think the media lens has distorted it somewhat by attempting to simplify it for our consumption.

I do not believe there is such a thing as an Arab Spring. If there is [an Arab Spring], I also believe it died with our ambassador in Benghazi.

Thank you.