

SUMMARY - MAGHREB ROUNDTABLE SERIES

PARTICIPATING SCHOLARS

Ellen Lust is associate professor in the Department of Political Science and founding director of the program on governance and local development at Yale University, where her research focuses on the politics of authoritarianism, transitions, and development in the Middle East. Lust is currently writing a book examining the politics of elections in the Arab world, as well as a jointly authored volume on Egypt's transition. She earned her Ph.D. in political science from the University of Michigan.

William Lawrence was director of the North Africa Project at the International Crisis Group (ICG) until July 2013. Prior to joining ICG, he served in a number of positions at the U.S. State Department in Washington and in North Africa. Lawrence has taught at a number of universities and spent 12 years living in North Africa. He earned his Ph.D. from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts. ■

Egypt's Impact on Maghreb Political Dynamics

Political upheaval in Egypt, including the overthrow of the Morsi government, has affected political debates and actors across the Maghreb in different ways. Though political actors across the region see implications for local politics in Egypt's recent events, the specific circumstances in each country remain the most important determinants of how local political trends will evolve in the Maghreb. William Lawrence, visiting professor of political science and international affairs at the George Washington University, and Ellen Lust, associate professor of political science at Yale University, shared their assessments of the broader regional effects of developments in Egypt at a CSIS Maghreb Roundtable entitled "Egypt's Impact on Maghreb Political Dynamics" on September 16, 2013. While acknowledging that Egyptian dynamics have been influential, particularly with regard to the outlook for other Islamist political parties, both Lust and Lawrence also cautioned against overstating Egypt's influence on other countries' domestic affairs.

Egypt and the Maghreb share common challenges, yet each country in the Maghreb has specific national characteristics that drive the trajectory of its political transition and its interpretation of events in Egypt, Lust emphasized. She noted a shift in discourse in Libya and Tunisia in particular. This occurred both among those who see Egypt as an example of how protest movements can oust unsatisfying politicians, and among those who see Egypt as a cautionary tale of change gone wrong. Lawrence noted that in many ways, interpretations of these events derive from countries' experiences with Islamism. Those with more negative experiences of Islamism, such as Algerians, are more likely to view the actions of the military in Egypt sympathetically. He also pointed out the important role of economics in driving anti-government protests in Egypt and elsewhere.

Lust argued that Tunisians' continued interest in relying on institutions and willingness to reach compromise arrangements are positive attributes largely absent in Egypt. Thus, while Tunisia's Tamarod movement is similar to Egypt's, it has not had the same impact. This is both because Tunisia's military is more apolitical than Egypt's, and because Ennahda has demonstrated greater willingness to dialogue with opposition forces. According to Lust and Lawrence, this willingness to compromise gives Tunisia the best chance of reaching political accommodations and a successful tran-

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The CSIS Maghreb Roundtable was launched in May 2013 to provide a deeper understanding of economic, social, political, and security developments within individual states in the Maghreb, as well as how these dynamics intersect across North Africa and what their implications are for U.S. policy. The roundtable assembles a diverse group of North African and U.S. regional experts, policymakers, academics, and business leaders, seeking to provide a forum for the exchange of views. ■

sition. Even as public discourse becomes more polarized, private opinions remain diverse and relatively accommodating, Lawrence observed, with political actors still willing to work with opposing factions to prevent a breakdown in governance and political dialogue.

Lust noted that the predominant cleavage in Tunisian politics remains the secular-Islamist divide. While acknowledging that those old ideological cleavages still exist, Lawrence argued that the Arab uprisings rejected previous divisions. He observes a growing trend of Egyptians, for example, who reject both the military and the Muslim Brotherhood, and who advocate for the principles which first galvanized the uprisings in early 2011. That trend could grow in the Maghreb too, as people grow resentful of current political actors. According to Lawrence, the “Tunisian experiment” is the most threatened by Egypt instead because of the potential effects on divisions within Ennahda and between Ennahda and Tunisia’s salafists. Ennahda’s rank and file is increasingly disenchanted with its own political leadership and drawn more toward the salafi position, he argued, which has also become more radical. Dynamics internal to Tunisia largely drive this rift, but Egypt’s example could exacerbate the trend.

The prominence of regional factors rather than religious-secular splits in Libya has limited the effects of the Egyptian example on Libyan politics. Lawrence asserted that events in Egypt have primarily emboldened Libya’s internal factions to feel that brinkmanship can achieve their political aims. This might shape the tactics of factions who seek a strong central government and those who advocate federalism.

Elsewhere in the Maghreb, strong macroeconomic management in Morocco has helped keep things “on track” in that country, Lawrence said. Still, he added, some believe that a backlash against the Justice and Development Party (PJD) is imminent because of ongoing economic challenges. High unemployment and the rising cost of basic goods have bred disaffection both among the public and among governing elites. A sense that the tide is turning against Islamist politics in the region could affect how the public views the PJD.

Egypt’s impact on the internal Algerian debate has been minimal, Lawrence said. Algerians continue to filter their perceptions of Egypt through their own experience with Islamism, particularly throughout the 1990s and the civil war. Local Islamists did form a three-party coalition in order to “organize for the Arab Spring,” which they equated

with Islamist victory, but their popularity is low. According to Lawrence, most Algerians remain pleased with the role of their military fighting extremism (including at In Amenas in January 2013) and skeptical of the regional political upheaval.

Overall, Egypt’s experiences have the most impact on how people perceive the broader trajectory of the Arab uprisings and the future of Islamism in the region. Maghreb countries today are more united by the model they seek to avoid—and none want to repeat the Egyptian experience—than by any model they seek to follow. ■

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