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Post-Revolutionary Regional Order and the Challenge of Political Islam

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Lord Jopling, Ladies and Gentlemen,

thank you very much for inviting me to your spring session to address such a distinguished audience, and hopefully not only address, but also discuss with you the issues that have already been raised in Ulla Schmidt's presentation and paper. I hope to be able to continue, and suggest possible answers, to some of the questions we have discussed just now.

I was asked to talk about "Post-Revolutionary Regional Order *and...*," as if that was not enough, about "the Challenge of Political Islam". This is a daunting task and I will, like Ulla Schmidt, have no choice but to continue with an issues-centered approach rather than a country-by-country look at developments after the Arab uprisings in order to detect evolving regional patterns.

The key questions, of course, when talking about "regional order", are: What has changed?; what not?; in what respect?; and, most importantly: How can we - how can *you* grasp these developments and, finally: what does that mean? More specifically: What does that mean concretely for you as members of this assembly, but also for you as elected representatives of your own countries?

I am *not* going to address most issues you may think I would address: I am not going to talk about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I am not talking about Iraq's very uncertain future as an essentially failed state, nor am I going to discuss Iran's nuclear ambitions. This is because I would like to convey a notion of the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region that goes beyond, that goes deeper than day-to-day politics.

But note that when I do not talk about these issues, that means I consider them structural features. The issues just mentioned are here to stay with us for the foreseeable future and thus represent constants rather than changes, despite Secretary Kerry's latest negotiation plans. They will shape the Middle East's face in the future as they have done over the past decades. Of course, there are other such structural givens, such as, for instance, the tremendous socio-economic challenges the region faces, the youth bulge and other demographic factors, educational levels, and so on, but I cannot address these in depth here.

Yet, the post-"Arab Spring" Middle East will look decisively different than before *despite* numerous structural constants, and while any "**post-revolutionary regional order**" obviously is still in the making, there are, as I am convinced, **three core determinants or variables**. Depending on the particular shape they take on over the next few years, we will face different scenarios.

The first such point relates to how much of a "post-revolutionary" there actually is in the MENA region, or to: "revolution vs. statehood"; the second concerns political Islam and regional order, or: "political Islam on the rise", and the third concerns shifting roles on the international scene and in Western-Arab relations, or: "the end of Western Middle East policy doctrines as we knew them".

1. Revolutions and Statehood at Risk

- a) How many revolutions did we actually see since 2010 in the MENA region? We had four cases in which heads of state were toppled through mass popular protests (Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, Libya), but **only two** of these occurred through **revolutions (Libya and Tunisia)** – despite local language usage in Egypt which I respect when in the country because of what those protesters have achieved, but academically, Egypt 2011 would not qualify as a revolution. We might face another – ongoing – revolution in the region, and that is in Syria, but again, doubts may be raised. This means that despite the uprisings, **three quarters of the region's political systems remain authoritarian regimes** or, more specifically, the countries remain under neo-patrimonial rule that has shaped the picture of the region since the 1960s / 1970s.
- b) Nonetheless, the **political landscape** of the MENA has become **less uniform** and more differentiated **after the recent uprisings** – and us scholars struggle about how to detect patterns in the **seemingly chaotic** unfolding of events in the individual countries of the region just as much as policy-makers do, how to group countries, and how to categorize what happened where. One helpful device might be a simple four-field matrix:

	Oil-Rich	Oil-Poor
Traditional Monarchies	Saudi-Arabia Qatar Kuwait Bahrain United Arab Emirates Oman	Morocco Jordan Lebanon
Socialist-Progressivist Republics	Libya Iraq Algeria	Egypt Tunisia Syria Yemen

The oil-poor republics (lower right box) have been significantly more likely to experience regime breakdown or deep ruptures in their political orders than the oil-rich traditional monarchies of the Gulf region (upper left box). At least two factors distinguish them from one another: First, the degree to which political regimes can afford to forego taxation of their populations and buy off dissent. This practice has been made ample use of in the immediate aftermath of the uprisings and mass protests. All Gulf states reacted to the Arab Spring with immediate distribution of material benefits to their populations, sometimes one-shot payments to each family, such as in Kuwait, or through other distributional

mechanisms such as increasing public sector wages, (in some cases by more than 100 per cent), etc. The second distinctive element consists of differences in the respective civic cultures in the traditional monarchies vis-à-vis the republics. All republics have, at least during one phase of their history, seen an ideological rupture with past traditional forms of authority and pursued some form of collectivist ideology, mostly some form of Arab socialism, that came to power through revolutions and/or *coups d'état*. While, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, much of the appeal of collectivist ideologies has been lost, the past experience of revolutionary moments may have an influence on current events. It is noteworthy that the oil-rich countries of the upper left box now try to recruit the oil-poor monarchies of Jordan and Morocco who survived their own Arab Spring, under the umbrella of the club of autocrats of the Gulf Cooperation Council and offer them membership. Lebanon, for its part, had not witnessed larger protests in the course of the current uprising, while Iraq (as a largely failed state with little central authority to begin with) falls somewhat out of the picture. Likewise, Algeria saw mass protests, is oil rich, but managed to respond with effective and harsh repression. The only real outlier thus is Libya where we would not have expected the fall of a regime, but then again it could be argued that this was forced about by external military intervention.

- c) In a nutshell, and in diachronic comparison, we can state the following: In the 2000s, we saw the **transformation of a “triangle of autocratic stability”** that existed in the 1990s and consisted of Egypt, Syria and Saudi-Arabia – a transformation on the regional level of the influence of this constellation **into** something that could be called a **“triangle of instability”** with Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq at its corners, or even a “square” if you want to include Yemen, the central government of which, in the course of the 2000s, has increasingly come under stress. This pre-Arab Spring tendency has been reinforced and increased in both scope and in depth after the Arab uprisings: In two years only, we had to add to the said triangle of **Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon** the very uncertain post-war **Libya**, as well as a war-torn and devastated **Syria** (in every respect, and infrastructure is likely among the least things devastated in that war). On top of that comes a severely aggravated situation in **Yemen**, with the latter already a regular member of the world’s top ten on the *Failed States Index*. Furthermore, we have seen extremely fragile situations in **Bahrain** where repression could thwart protests for the time being, but no structural problem underlying the protests there has been solved or even seriously addressed, so this is not the end of the story in Bahrain.

Yet more recently, there are worrisome signs from two of the traditionally strongest states of the region, **Egypt** and **Tunisia**. Tunisia has lately seen Salafi uprisings and violent attacks against state institutions and their representatives. These are clear signs not only of intolerance, but of defiance of the state as such. Security forces have recently even faced **difficulties in controlling the territory** and been facing threats and challenges by **militant Salafi-jihadi groups** such as the *Ansar-ash-Sharia*. We will likely see **violent clashes** between their

supporters and security forces of a state that prohibited their annual gathering in the province of Kairaouan scheduled for tomorrow. The same goes for **Egypt**, where there is a widespread feeling of discontent. Anti-Mursi demonstrations take on similar shapes today as they took on against former president Mubarak, and curfews are disobeyed, mainly for the sake of **defying the state as such**. Today, the Egyptian police frequently do not even dare try to dissolve protests because they know they would just contribute to their radicalization by doing so, given the widespread, but diffuse anger of protesters that gears itself against anything that looks like “the state”.

In sum, the threat of **eroding and failing statehood** is not a new feature in the region, but it has been **exacerbated** after the Arab uprisings and we now count some seven or eight countries at least that have to cope with serious challenges to statehood. This is relevant since it poses **threats to security not only to domestic societies, but also on a regional and international level**, and therefore should be watched closely and considered to be among the key challenges. Developments in this field will be among the key determinants of a future regional order and of the overall face of a post-Arab spring Middle East.

2. The Rise of Political Islam...

...is a second core determinant of the region's future political order. The starting point here is the observation that **in all those contexts where** a degree (even though limited in many cases) of **pluralism existed** or was gained in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, **Islamist groups**, parties and movements **came out with landslide electoral victories**. This phenomenon is not a new one, to be sure: It started at the latest with the **2006 Palestinian elections** and the victory of Hamas – arguably the first free and fair elections in the Arab world that met OSCE standards. But it became more visible through the three **2011/-12 elections in Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt**, with so-called “mainstream” or “moderate” Islamist parties as the respective winners: the *Parti du Justice et du Développement* in Morocco; *Ennahda* in Tunisia; and the *Freedom and Justice Party* in Egypt, respectively. (I leave out the question why this was the case for now and postpone that to the Q-&-A session since there is too little time now).

However, that development was not surprising to area specialists. Years before we even dreamt of free elections in Egypt, we had expected the Muslim Brotherhood to win some 40 to 45 per cent of the vote IF free and fair elections were possible. What we did not expect and which genuinely surprised us was the very quick ascent of more radical Islamist forces of the Salafist (and in some instances of the jihadi) type, and that they, as was the case in Egypt, would gain more than another quarter of the

vote. We had not anticipated that *Hizb an-Nour* and its allies would gain 25 to 27 per cent of the votes cast.

This phenomenon of the **rapid rise of Salafism** and, in parts, jihadism, is extremely relevant for two reasons – in fact it **is a decisive factor for the post-revolutionary regional order**. It is about to become an **underlying pattern of actor constellations** in national political systems, if not always clearly visible.

Morocco, in this respect, is an exception to some extent since the old authoritarian regime is still firmly in place there and “guides” (read: controls) the formation and re-formation of the domestic political landscape.

In Tunisia, Salafist movements chose not to participate in the 2011 elections to the constituent assembly, while a similar pattern was seen in Libya. It was only in 2012/-13 that the first Salafist political party received a license to operate in Tunisia.

However, the constellation of a strong and large “mainstream” Islamist party in a government position alongside with a smaller, but strongly voiced Salafist current leads to a **“sandwiching” of the large popular Islamist parties** such as Ennahda in Tunisia or the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (one might add Islah in Yemen or the Islamic Action Front in Jordan as well as the PJD in Morocco, even though a range of structural factors make the constellations qualitatively different there from those in Egypt and Tunisia). What we see is a “sandwiching” between governmental duties, including foreign relations with the West and compliance with international commitments and treaties, etc., on the one hand, and the growing temptation to take very lenient stances towards the more radical proponents of political Islam in the domestic scene on the other because the moderate Islamists are in fear of losing yet more votes to that camp.

Typically, this leads **mainstream Islamist groups to engage in a double talk** and ambiguous formulations as regards the role of religion in state and society, and in fields in which universal (or Western?) standards are not shared by Salafist-jihadist groups. This becomes evident in interviews with Western media, but also in legal documents such as constitutions and laws where formulations typically are less than clear and are left open to further interpretation. Often, the **domestic discourse** of leading politicians then **differs decisively from that on the international scene**, as happened recently with Moroccan Premier Benkirane who at home denounced an AFP report about what he had told interviewers in the US. Overall, thus, the new Islamist governments in the Arab world are in no enviable position. If then the military adds to the confusion as another player in the game for power, as is the case in Egypt, the situation becomes truly complex.

But **how and why can Islamism grow so quickly?** Well, there are a number of factors at work that play together in explaining the relative success, both in elections and beyond the ballot box, of Islamist movements and parties. One of them is the **failure of all other coherent ideologies**. This includes, to be sure, “Western” democracy and “Western” capitalism that have both failed in the eyes of the local audiences across the region. The reason here is that much of what these audiences

actually experienced as concrete and tangible influences of “democracies” did not – for the past hundred years or so – bring them much good.

But one major enabling factor is that **political Islam, including its extremist variants, is massively sponsored**. In that sense, **one key to any future MENA regional order lies in Saudi-Arabia and Qatar**. I have been constantly appalled by Western politicians labeling Saudi-Arabia an “important security partner” or an “anchor of stability” in this fragile region. I am sorry to say: This is simply wrong; the opposite is true. **Saudi-Arabia has been a destabilizing factor within the region – and far beyond**. Part of this is due to domestic constellations of actors within the kingdom: Saudi-Arabia is – apart from Israel and Iran – the only country worldwide that bases the legitimacy of its regime exclusively on religious grounds and therefore must make concessions to its Sunni religious establishment in various regards. I cannot remember, for instance, a Saudi cabinet in which the post of the minister of education was not held by a Wahhabi religious scholar. This has effects, however, far beyond Saudi-Arabia itself.

Saudi-Arabian and Qatari actors, but public and private, have been very strong supporters and financiers of radical to militant Islamism in many ways and through many channels. Consider, to take one **example**, the case **of Saudi influence in and over developments in Yemen**: For years, Saudi Arabia has offered free religious training to poor Yemenis. Also for years, we have been watching semi-educated young Saudi *Wahhabi* Imams pour into Yemen and preach their radical and essentially intolerant version of Islam there, thereby slowly converting societal attitudes in Yemen away from the country’s traditionally liberal interpretation of Islam into a society parts of which are today receptive to *Al-Qaida*-like argumentations up to the point that *Al-Qaida* effectively ruled over entire provinces – in the virtual absence of a central authority – of Yemen such as in *Abyan*. In 2013, every fifth person killed in US-strikes against *Al-Qaida* has been a Saudi national – which in turn reminds us of the fact that the vast majority of the perpetrators of 9-11 held the same nationality. It is very hard to not establish a direct link between the radicalization of political Islam in Yemen and Saudi Arabia’s share in that process.

I do not agree with Bernhard Lewis on many issues, but when explaining Saudi Arabia’s role in spreading extremist religious thought he gave a telling analogy: Observers should imagine the Ku-Klux-Klan or a similar group to have access to all the financial resources Saudi-Arabia gains from its oil and gas exports, and use them for the purpose of spreading their beliefs, then one could roughly imagine how such spread was accelerated exponentially. Without these resources, he said, **Wahhabism** of the Saudi style would today be nothing but a marginal **extremist sect within the Islamic world**.

In fact, **Saudi-Arabian sources have funded Salafist and extremist varieties of Islam not only across the Middle East, but also in Kazakhstan, in the Caucasus, in the Balkans, and in EU member countries such as Germany and France**. Recently, the latter have both seen **violent clashes** between militant Salafists and police with several injured.

In Tunisia, offices recruit Islamist fighters who – via Turkey – join the ranks of the *Al-Qaida in Iraq* – endorsed *Jabhat an-Nusra li-Ahl ash-Sham* (short: *an-Nusra*) to fight in the Syrian civil war against the Assad regime. Social actors involved in this “business” within Tunisia have stated that they receive 3’000 US-Dollars per conscript as a per-capita quota from Qatari sources. The fighters are then brought to Turkey, cross the border into Syria, where in turn they join well-financed and well-equipped jihadist groups several ones of which are said to receive their arms and other equipment from Saudi Arabian sources. Thus, there is a whole regional business of Salafi-jihadi financing and operating, running from the Gulf through the Maghreb, and via Turkey right into Syria’s civil war.

This phenomenon has to be watched very closely in order to see in what direction any potential “post-revolutionary” regional political order will develop.

Qatar is another major financier of political Islam and has, for instance, repeatedly been named a sponsor of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and its *Freedom and Justice Party* whereas **Saudi-Arabian sources** are said to have **funded Egypt’s Salafist *an-Nour* party** with more than 100 million US-Dollars since the party was formed in the post-Mubarak era.

In sum, thus, with secularism and liberalism without big chances of finding any significant amount of followers, one -if not *the*- **decisive question** for a future regional order of the MENA is: **Which version of Sunni political Islam will prevail?** The more moderate and mainstream version of *Ennahda* and her likes – or the more radical Salafi version of the Egyptian alliance led by the *Nour Party* and its allies? Will Salafi and/or jihadi groups succeed in delegitimizing current governments in Libya, Tunisia and Egypt? If so, and the possibility seems quite real given that none of the new governments will be able to deliver on the socio-economic demands of the populations, then a further radicalization of many within Arab societies is not unlikely in the medium term.

3.) The Failure of Western Middle East Policy Doctrines

Among the three determinants of a regional order after the “Arab Spring” I discuss today, **Western Middle East policy is the only one that you** as political decision-makers **can influence directly**.

Key questions with respect to this third determinant are: Will the US and the EU manage to...

- a) ...successfully reconsider and revisit the flawed concepts on which past policy priorities rested and which made these policies essentially a failure?
- b) ...achieve a greater degree of coherence and reconciliation between diverse and at times conflicting policy goals?

- c) ...implement an eventually re-formulated Middle East policy more consistently and stringently than in the past?

Sadly, **the Arab uprisings have demonstrated a rather complete failure of Middle East policies as the US and Europe had pursued them for decades.**

What did Western Middle East policies aim at? Apart from some obvious geostrategic considerations such as securing access to the region's hydrocarbons, guaranteeing Israel's existence, and gaining access to a potentially huge export market for industrial products, there are three or **four major other policy goals** which have been publicly declared. The 1995 Barcelona Declaration summed them up as **peace, stability, and prosperity** – and the latter may also be read as “development”. We may wish to add **security** in case we do not see it as already included in the concept of “stability”.

These have been, according to official rhetoric, the primary policy goals any Middle East policy claimed to pursue. To be sure: **There is nothing wrong with these goals as such. However, the policies actually pursued have in no way been adequate means to reach these goals.**

As Ulla Schmidt has stressed in her paper, the **strategy of simply siding with dictatorial regimes and acting as their accomplice** in an only seemingly joint struggle **for what we thought was “political stability”** (but in reality was political stagnation) – this has more than clearly proven to be the wrong strategy. As a matter of fact, such behavior cannot even be called a “strategy” because a strategy requires a level of conceptual reflection about the possible avenues of political goal attainment that has been thoroughly missing in past Western Middle East policies. It rather represents a convenient foreign policy behavior that tries to avoid stress to relations with difficult partners when the former bear the risk of becoming conflictive. This is not only unsustainable, both ethically and politically. The **pursuit of such a “strategy” also entails very serious long-term economic and political costs.**

The **price we have paid** is an enormous one: It is a **near-total lack of credibility of Western ideals and values in a very fragile world region** in which we consistently and over decades turned a blind eye towards gross and routine human rights violations that were an integral part of the very set-up of the political order in almost all countries of that region. This **delegitimization of Western values** is particularly problematic as today's challenges would require strong alliances with non-radical popular actors in the region. It is, second, the silent acceptance of a **blatant lack of development-orientation by self-enriching autocratic regimes** and thus the acceptance of a **stagnating development process** that has **increased socio-economic distress** and exacerbates these challenges after the demise of the former regimes. The funds embezzled through **illegal and semi-legal self-enrichment of the ruling families** and confiscated or frozen in Western banks, those (rather small portion) of the Mubarak family that were actually captured after his fall, plus funds of the Ghaddafi family that were frozen in US-banks (excluding European ones), and those of the Ben Ali clan (again, excluding the 400kg in gold which his wife secured

before leaving the country) - arguably a rather small part of the total fortune of those three families – amounted to ca. 125 billion US-Dollars. This is well **more than the total global annual amount of official development assistance** (ODA; ca. 120 bn USD in 2011). If anybody has doubts about the lack of development-orientation of the pre-Arab spring authoritarian regimes (and I wish to explicitly include in this argument *ALL* those Arab regimes whose leadership has not changed after the recent uprisings!), then this trend should be clear enough to answer them.

We know at least since **Lord Dahrendorf's "Theory of Social Conflict"**, dating of the early 1960s, that, as he writes, "contexts in which conflicts are suppressed threaten to result in situations where a sudden and **violent eruption of conflicts must be regarded as a result of their prior suppression**". Very obviously, the "sudden and violent" outbreak of conflicts is quite the **opposite of stability, nor can it** be thought of to **contribute to** any kind of **security** – not in a traditional sense of the term, and even less so in the sense of *human* security.

State-society relations in the autocratic and repressive Arab regimes before the uprisings **were** – and in a majority of countries still are today! – **typical examples of such situations Dahrendorf described**. Therefore, it should be obvious by now to those who try to preserve and perpetuate such conflictual constellations can -at most and only maybe- postpone the outbreak of violent conflict for a while, but they actively breed it in the longer run.

Logically, a strategy of siding with dictators who do not aim at developing their countries nor guarantee socio-economic participation and fundamental human and political rights cannot achieve stability, let alone any kind of sustainable security. Quite the opposite is the case: In the long run, **this strategy** – apart from thoroughly delegitimizing Western policies in the eyes of Middle Eastern people – almost inevitably **leads to strongly increased security threats**; and, I am afraid to say, this is what we are witnessing today, in the post-"Arab Spring" period.

The truly surprising element in this flawed non-strategy of former Western Middle East policies is the extent of consistency by which this siding with Arab autocrats – be they secular in nature such as the former Tunisian ruler or display extremist-religious tendencies such as in Saudi-Arabia – was implemented to the detriment of the clear and understood demands of the majorities of local populations.

Let me underline one point again in order not to be misunderstood: It is not the proclaimed policy goals *per se* that are problematic; it is the truncated and rather **rudimentary understanding of** what the **concepts underlying** these **policy goals** mean in actual practice and an equally simplistic and fundamentally flawed imagination of how they could be reached.

What **we urgently need** today, thus, is a **reconsideration and revision of strategies**. This requires as a **prerequisite a step back to the concepts of peace, security, and development** in order to generate proper and up-to-date understandings of the concept. Only then will it be possible to **develop, from these,**

coherent political strategies which can then, in a third step, be put into practice politically, economically, and diplomatically. If, as Prime Minister Juncker put it yesterday, Europe and NATO member countries are to “stand together for democracy and freedom”, then negating that freedom to the vast majority of the peoples of the region by unreflectedly **siding with dictators for a *fata morgana* of political stability** can **no longer be a credible policy rationale**. Rather, it needs to be replaced by a substitute that is yet to be formulated. More importantly yet, this alternative strategy will also have to be implemented coherently and consistently with other policies that this has been the case in the past.

* * *

If I may, I would like to end with an anecdote that happened years ago when I lived in Syria: When I had visitors and we were travelling through the Syrian desert, we arrived at a little village in the middle of nowhere, where only the women and children were present since the men were away grazing the goats. Suddenly, as we approached, all the children started crying and hid in their huts made of clay. Why are they so afraid? When we stopped and talked to the women, it turned out that the children had thought we were the doctors because the annual visit by the doctor was the only time they had ever seen a car, and that meant painful injections for vaccination and bad tasting medicine.

Now, that Western car that called itself “democracy”, whenever it arrived in the Arab world over the past decades and, in fact, for at least the last one hundred years, rarely brought anything that made the local population benefit from it. Rather, while Western powers were enjoying democracy at home, their foreign policies contained occupation, exploitation, and massive oppression or, later – and up to the Arab spring – massive support to repressive regimes where torture of opponents was, and in many places still is, the daily routine. No wonder, thus, that our “democracy car” does not resonate well among local populations...nor that people in the Arab world do not generally find our policies credible or even morally acceptable.

If we want Western policies and involvement in Middle Eastern affairs to gain at least some degree of credibility, we then need to make sure that our “car”, when it reaches the Middle East and North Africa, carries different things in the future than it did until now. For the time being however, and to a large extent as a direct consequence of decades of flawed and now obviously failed policies, people will run from rather than run towards “democracy”.