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Revolution and Counter-revolution in the Middle East: A lecture by Professor Gilles Kepel

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On November 16 2011, Professor Gilles Kepel of Sciences Po, a former holder of the Philippe Roman Chair at LSE IDEAS and a renowned scholar of Middle Easter politics, society and history, visited the LSE in order to deliver his analysis of the unfolding events in the aftermath (?) of the colossal events in **Egypt** and **Tunisia**. This blog entry provides a brief review of the content of Professor Kepel's lecture.

Professor Kepel opened the lecture by arguing that both governments and the public in the region are still facing major challenges in terms of stabilising the region and building upon the achievements of the protest movements in order to promote further reforms. He stressed from the beginning, however, the he prefers not to define the unfolding events as a revolution yet, since the situation in both Egypt and Tunisia is still supervised to a lot of extent by the same elites, and particularly the army.

The events in the Arab world reflect changes not only at the regional level, but also at the international level. According to Professor Kepel, we have to bear in mind that the diaspora, and especially the large diaspora community in Western Europe, played an important part in the protest. Therefore, when we examine the events of the "Arab Spring," we should look not only at regional, but also at geopolitical developments.

One primary cause for the emergence of the unrest was the decrease in the capacity of the Arab governments to exert brutality to suppress their population. This was mainly the result of international public pressure. In addition, there was a popular element to it. The public in Tunisia, for example, was now less worried about al-Qaeda and a potential Salafi take-over. Therefore you could see more members of the middleclass joining the protest with the purpose of changing the regime.

The revolutionary movements are quite different than each other. In Tunisia, the revolution was perceived as a class issue, namely a poor vs. rich uprising. However, now it seems that there is competition on a tribal base as well. The more we scratch the surface, we realise that the situation is far more complicated. In fact, there was an alliance between the elites, some of the protestors and even the army, which has been marginalised under Ben Ali. The moderate Islamist al-Nahda Party will have to form a coalition with other forces. Everything is still opened. In Egypt, in contrast to Tunisia, there was no structural transformation. The revolution is usurped not only by Islamists, but also by the army.

In **Libya**, revolutionaries and NATO worked together. Political environment is now opened, but there is also awakening of the tribes and regional identities. Indeed, Tripoli witnesses an outburst of political activism, including of Berbers and other forces from the periphery, who seek a democratic solution.

But what about where political changes did not happen following the mass protest? **Bahrain**: when events began unfolding, the Saudis and other gulf states were alarmed and the Saudis invaded. They crashed the movement, but now Bahrain is dysfunctional. Shiites are now scared and cannot work. Because there is still fear of Iran, the Saudi presence in Bahrain is still accepted by the international community.

In **Yemen**, the big threat is that it will be in such a state of turmoil that it would move to **Saudi Arabia**. It is plunged is in big chaos and l-Qaeda is controlling some parts of the region. Also, instability may jeopardise the gulf of Aden, and also enhance piracy.
There are still prospects for regional instability, which require a careful analysis of the unfolding events.

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