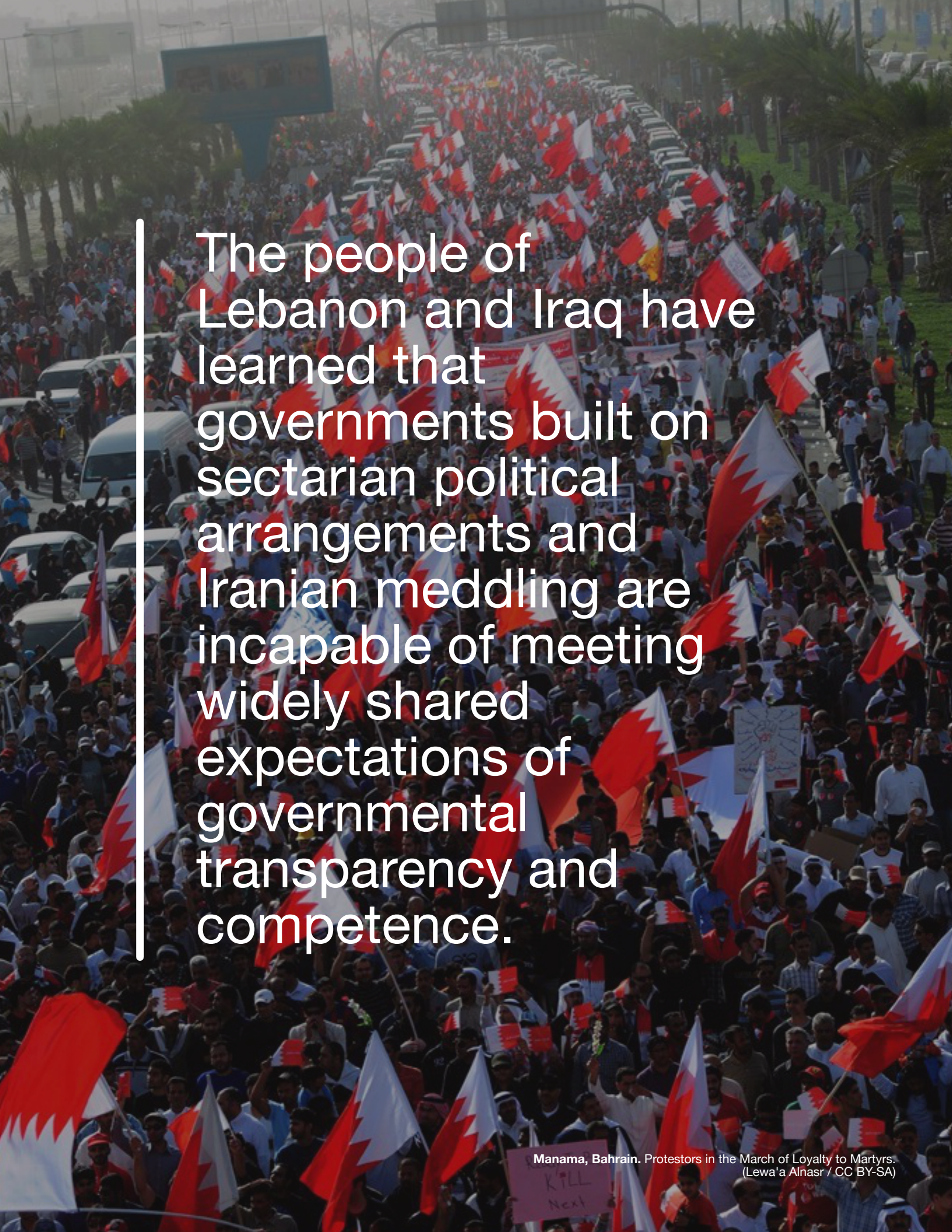

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Manama, Bahrain. Protestors in the March of Loyalty to Martyrs. (Lewa'a Alnasr / CC BY-SA)

The Levant Express: The Arab Uprisings, Human Rights and the Future of the Middle East

A Conversation with Dr. Micheline Ishay

Interviewed by Grady Jacobsen

Fletcher Security Review: Good afternoon, Professor Ishay. Thank you for coming to the Fares Center for Eastern Mediterranean Studies here at the Fletcher School and for agreeing to speak with us at *The Fletcher Security Review*. I had a chance to read the introduction to your book, *The Levant Express*, before your talk today, and I can't wait to go back and finish it. I'd like to ask you a few questions about the future of the Middle East, how renewed civil unrest could affect the security situation, and unpack the human rights situation in the region.

So, let's get started. Do you believe we are experiencing a new phenomenon in these renewed protests, or do you believe the Arab Spring is still ongoing and has just been dormant since 2013?

Micheline Ishay (MI): My recent book *The Levant Express: The Arab Uprisings, Human Rights and the Future of the Middle East*, anticipated that another wave of protests would follow the failures of the Arab Spring. The original uprisings occurred in the context of U.S. retrenchment from the region, intensifying regional proxy wars, failed political reforms, lingering economic crises with high youth unemployment, and the heightened capacity for mass mobilization using new digital tools to spread human rights ideals. These factors are still in place, and the problems that led to the uprisings have only worsened. Therefore, it is no surprise to see renewed protests in the streets of Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran. They represent a second wave of the Arab Spring—a renewed stand against even deeper regional authoritarianism.

FSR: How have protesters today learned from some of the failures and success stories of the Arab Spring?

MI: The people of Lebanon and Iraq have learned that governments built on sectarian political arrangements and Iranian meddling are incapable of meeting widely shared expectations of governmental transparency and competence. As a result, the demand for secular and democratic governance is growing. That is particularly true for women, long repressed in strict religious and patriarchal societies, who have found their voices and political empowerment during the Arab uprisings. While many were sent back home after the uprisings, they awaited the opportunity to return to the public squares, becoming a driving force in the new wave of protests in 2019. Many 2011 protesters also learned that political revolution was not enough; economic transformation was also necessary. The new protests, which often focus on corruption, will likely evolve toward broader demands for equitable economic policies. It would help if the Western powers reengage to emphasize the need for a Middle East New Deal, including equal opportunity for both women and men in the workforce, something that did not result from the revolutionary uprisings in 2011.

Aden, Yemen. Protestors call for the secession of South Yemen. (AlMahra / CC BY-SA)

Bani Walid, Libya. NTC fighters claim Bani Walid. (Magharebia / CC BY)

FSR: Am I correct that we are observing a renewed commitment to nonviolent protest in the Middle East? How do you see these protesters overcoming militaristic regimes that aren't afraid to use force in order to silence them?

MI: Despite subsequent setbacks, the 2011 revolts did display the power of nonviolent movements to challenge, and in some cases to remove, repressive dictators. The Arab uprisings began with great discipline and leadership in the face of provocations and state violence, even though Syria, Yemen, and Libya later descended into civil wars. Whether nonviolent movements succeed in the future depends in part on the scale and resolve of the protest movements. In cases like Egypt, protester resolve only increased when the dictatorship turned violent. The power of mass uprisings, and their viability for outlasting initial nonviolent success, largely depends on coalescing around clear social, political, and economic platforms for the transition and post-transition periods. Protest movements must also gain the support of the armed forces, foreign economic assistance, and international recognition. The various Arab uprisings fell short on at least one of these key requirements. Post-revolutionary regimes became even more fiercely authoritarian than they were prior to the Arab Spring, reflecting well-founded concerns of resurgent mass democratic movements that may or may not use violence to topple authoritarian governments.

FSR: What does this simultaneous unrest mean for security in the region? If and when these conflicts escalate, do you see opportunities for terrorist groups to exploit the unrest to gain a new foothold?

MI: Simultaneous resistance movements in any region always create some form of instability. But repressing protests in the name of security yields popular resentment that simmers until the next opening for social unrest. A plan for regional security should materialize consistent with basic human rights, including civil, political, and economic rights. After all, since Machiavelli, we have known that well-managed democracies are more stable than incompetent authoritarian regimes. Short of addressing the different economic and security problems in various theaters, as proposed in my book, vacuums will be created that provide opportunities for terrorist groups. We are already seeing signs of a resurgent ISIS, as many ISIS prisoners have escaped into Iraq and may be hoping to create a new caliphate. In Libya and Sub-Saharan Africa, jihadist groups have exploited political instability, poverty, and corruption to expand their influence. My book details political and economic plans that would counter social and economic unrests that feed terrorism, linking security measures to infrastructure projects that would provide work for women and men throughout the region. Integrated economic development requires new railways and roads, a shift toward renewable energy, and planning that brings together financial, commercial, and governmental interests.

FSR: You mentioned various "security theaters" in the Middle East. Could you describe those and say more about how you believe they will each require novel security arrangements to maintain stability?

MI: If the future of the Middle East and North Africa is of declining interest to the current U.S. administration, other powers could make significant contributions, especially in specific security theaters in which they already have historical interest. I describe five different sub-regions: the Maghreb, the Fertile Crescent, the embattled states, the Gulf states, and the weak Middle East countries now burdened by Syrian refugees. Each requires different approaches, and each has unique historical associations with particular outside powers.

For instance, in the Gulf countries, as regional powers grow weary of the brutal, financially draining, and unwinnable proxy wars driving the refugee crisis, Westerners need to back promising developments in the region and provide sustainable solutions. This is no chimera, as there are positive developments that have fallen below the radar of political campaigns. Unsurprisingly, high-level conversations are occurring, particularly in the Arab Gulf, toward expanding regional economic integration. These plans could be extended to address the needs of the millions of Syrian refugees displaced to Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, along with the region's massive unemployment.

Western engagement could also build on today's strengthening security cooperation between Israel, Jordan, and Egypt in the Fertile Crescent by promoting economic development

and other viable human rights for Palestinians, thereby addressing one underlying source of their conflict with Israel. These are some of many examples included in my book. *The Levant Express* examines how current efforts to build security regimes can draw on the specific characteristics of the sub-regional theaters, in which international and regional regimes combine security measures with post-war reconstruction initiatives, based on equitable economic development. Only under these conditions would great power influence and engagement be justified.

FSR: How do you encourage human rights in conservative Arab kingdoms like Mohammed bin Salman's Saudi Arabia or Mohammed bin Zayed's UAE? They seem to be signaling that they are willing to modernize while maintaining their monarchy, but can a country truly have human rights without democracy?

MI: The Golden Age of Islam shows us that expanding commerce can increase tolerance among different cultures and religions. One may hope that these countries will spearhead greater trade based on more diversified economies. It is true that the rulers of Saudi Arabia and the UAE are not keen to relinquish power at this juncture, even to become constitutional monarchs. But one can already observe that war fatigue, coupled with the impending global shift from reliance on fossil fuels, is prodding these countries toward more diverse economies, incorporating renewable energy, and increasing international cooperation. Economic diversification provides a pluralization of interests that will sooner or later manifest in political representation. Human rights can never be secure without democracy, but economic pressures and greater openness to the rest of the world may compel these modern monarchies to entertain a more diverse and free civil society. While Mohammed bin Salman seeks to tighten his grip on power, his steps toward constraining the clerics and advancing women's rights may ultimately set the stage for possible reforms. Sustained international pressure, including a shift in U.S. policy, will be instrumental in helping foster democratization and the separation between religion and the state.

FSR: When these movements reach a tipping point, at which they could fall back into repression or find success in their protests, what is required for events to fall in the right direction? In other words, what must happen for these protest movements to be successful?

MI: In other words, you are asking if these popular movements can gain traction on their own? I think that the international community should really focus on promoting economic and infrastructure projects toward creating sustainable and equitable development. "Give us the tools and we will finish the job," Winston Churchill said as he appealed to isolationist-inclined Americans for help against Hitler in 1940. The liberal democracies should provide the new wave of protesters with the tools to finish the job. Reclaiming a U.S. foreign policy based on human rights is an overdue first step. In the long run, a sustainable process of democratization also requires an economic New Deal to counter youth unemployment throughout the region. Such an initiative would counter Russia's geopolitical ambitions and China's authoritarian economic development model that extends its tentacles across the Middle East and Africa. The U.S. and its allies would benefit from a foreign policy that emphasizes infrastructure investment in the region. In contrast to China, the U.S. should aim to prevent recipient countries from drowning in debt, employ local populations, insist on inclusion of women in the workforce, and promote democracy alongside sustainable economic development. Such processes require persistence and patience, but economic diversification is essential to rebuild economies that have been overly dependent on oil production, and to create regional economic interdependence that helps bridge the divides between wealth and poverty, women and men, and Shia and Sunni.

FSR: This interview was conducted before the Middle East, like the rest of the world, was so significantly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. As the article was being prepared for publication, we went back to Professor Ishay to ask, How has the pandemic affected your understanding of what is needed in the Middle East?

MI: There is an advantage to proposals for the future that are informed by the history of post-World War II reconstructions efforts: these endeavors have already stood the test of time. While the book was written prior to the pandemic, Covid-19 has only made the situation more urgent. The region's yearning for human rights remains unanswered, authoritarian leaders use the unfolding tragedy as an opportunity grab for more power, and the people are in more jeopardy than ever. It is hard to imagine, given the urgency with which I wrote, but now the practical proposals I offer in the book are needed even more than before.

Dr. Micheline Ishay

Dr. Micheline Ishay received a Ph.D. in Political Science and International Studies from Rutgers University where she was a fellow at the Center for Critical Culture and Contemporary Analysis. She was later an Assistant Professor at both Hobart and William Smith College, a Senior Fellow at the Center for Democracy Collaborative at University of Maryland, the Lady Davis Visiting Professor at Hebrew University (2006), a Visiting Professor at Khalifa University in Abu Dhabi (2010-2013), and a Resident Fellow at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center in Italy, (Fall 2015).

As a female American scholar in human rights, Ishay offered a unique perspective during her work in the Gulf region (2010-2013) where she taught one of the first human rights courses in the Arab world at Khalifa University. During that time, she also met regularly with diplomats, world leaders, scholars and journalists to provide insight on this historical period of change in the Middle East.