

A Conversation with Thomas Carothers:

Understanding and Responding to the New Middle East

By Melissa Carlson

Change can be quick, dramatic, and unexpected. The face of an entire region can completely transform overnight into something foreign, confusing, and violent. The recent revolutions in the Arab World have turned the ways in which political scientists and policy makers approach the Middle East upside-down, making the future political structure of the region indistinct and unclear. When Thomas Carothers, vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and a leading thinker on democratization, spoke at the Athenaeum on April 18th, 2011, he explored the political upheaval in the Middle East by posing students and faculty with two very important questions. Can we learn about the nature and possible outcomes of these events by comparing them to outbreaks of democracy in other regions of the world? Has the United States found a new policy strategy that more effectively integrates its interests with the changing political realities of the region? Mr. Carothers is the founder and director of the Democracy and Rule of Law Program at the Carnegie Endowment, and has done extensive research on human rights, international law, foreign aid, rule of law, and civil society development. In addition to his experience, Mr. Carothers has written eight critically acclaimed books and published articles in prominent journals and newspapers focusing on democracy promotion. He has been a visiting faculty member at Oxford University, Central European University, and Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. Mr. Carothers's experience and research are crucial to gaining a more comprehensive perspective of the Arab Spring as well as deciding the best possible policy strategy for the United States to pursue as it adapts to the post-revolution Middle East.

Experience on the Ground

When asked what advice he would give to undergraduates aspiring to work in an internationally related field, Mr. Carothers immediately stated that every student must find a way to go abroad. "It doesn't matter what it is," said Mr. Carothers. "Its just going there, teaching English, or research. Anything that gets you out is good." Mr. Carothers likewise pointed out that

studying languages was just as important as receiving the ‘on-the-ground’ experience that students receive when working and studying in a foreign country. Even though more and more people are speaking English as the world becomes more and more interconnected, you will often find that people do not, and as Mr. Carothers said, “those people are usually the most interesting people.” After discussing the importance of gaining a wide and diverse international experience, Mr. Carothers likewise stated that it is important for students to open themselves up to the idea that international relations are multifaceted. International relations are about more than governments and nongovernmental organizations. It is an arrangement of activities and the organization of tremendous dimensions between media work, humanitarian networks, and political organizations that often transcend borders. “International relations have become such a complex domain,” said Mr. Carothers.

Coming to Terms

When asked what he thought the biggest challenge facing the international arena today was, Mr. Carothers simply responded with a small chuckle, and said, “There are so many big challenges. It is extremely hard to come to terms with what they exactly are.” Mr. Carothers explained that the nature and severity of the problems facing the international system change depending on the perspective you adopt when examining these problems. He emphasized the idea that many of the most pressing issues we are facing today are not experienced whatsoever by those living in the United States. Not many people in the United States experience the depth of suffering encountered by billions of people around the world every single day. “More than half the people in the world are living horrible lives,” said Mr. Carothers. “They don’t have anything to eat, and they have poor medical care if any at all. There are billions of people suffering every day, and that’s a reality.” Mr. Carothers likewise described the solution as being just as complex and hard to recognize and complicated as the problem itself. Even though many countries have dealt with poverty, human suffering still exists in the world. After highlighting the crippling problem of poverty, Mr. Carothers pointed to other challenges currently faced by the international community. “We have the continuing spread of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction through more and more countries,” said Mr. Carothers. “More and more countries are joining the club of nuclear armed states, which is a cause for concern...it’s a worrying situation.” Mr. Carothers also pointed to climate change as being a major issue that

must be focused on by the international community. “It is something that is slow-moving, a serious problem that will not be felt for several more decades. It really challenges human beings in the sense that it challenges our ability to work together, to put short-term gain aside for long-term benefit and our ability to take seriously differential impact and work together as a species rather than just as an individual country.”

After focusing on the issues troubling the entire globe, Mr. Carothers turned to the tensions arising from problems faced specifically by the Middle East. He pointed to the fact that certain parts of the Muslim world feel that they are not well treated by the rest of the international community. Radical Islamism is festering in some places, and even though it is not currently one of the world’s biggest challenges, it has the potential to become extremely problematic for the United States.

Development as Freedom in the Middle East

One of the most powerful ideas stressed by Mr. Carothers is to integrate freedom into our conception of development. According to him, this idea stands at the center of the debate in development circles about the level to which a country’s political development should be integrated alongside its economic development. Many people separate politics and economics into two different entities, and make the claim that countries can undergo sustainable and successful development without political freedoms. Mr. Carothers pointed to China as an example of a country that pulled its people out of poverty while still maintaining repressive regime. “I think development without serious political reform over time tends to run aground and tends to be problematic for economic development,” said Mr. Carothers. When looking at the processes of development, one has to keep in mind that human life has a broader conception of what both dignity and development means as well as recognize the fact that being politically respected and not mistreated needs to be a part of the international community’s conception of individuals.

Mr. Carothers used this same perspective of development when looking at the current political upheaval in the Arab world. “In a region where for decades people have said that the countries are not capable of becoming democratic and not really interested in democracy, the events of the past three and a half months have really been startling,” said Mr. Carothers. “These events have shown that people, particularly young people, are interested in democracy, and they

are willing to risk their lives for that goal.” The United States has to put aside this idea that the Middle East is an exception to the world’s tendency to want to advance and take part in modernization. Certain countries have been able to govern themselves in antiquated fashions through repressive and paternalistic monarchies because of their vast oil resources. If those countries did not have that oil they would not be able to conduct themselves in the repressive, anarchistic, and haphazard manner that they do now, especially since the rest of the region does not have oil. Mr. Carothers believes that democracy is crucial to the Arab world’s future. He likewise believes that the results to this current wave of change are going to be essential to determining the future of the entire region.

Looking at the Past to See the Future

Mr. Carothers believes that it is very important to study the record of the past twenty or thirty years in other regions to see how and why democracy has or has not advanced in different places. Even though every country and region is unique and is not like anywhere else, there are patterns to human events as well as norms within societies that show these countries’ strength, weaknesses, and goals. When talking about whether or not he sees such patterns in the recent upheaval of Arab societies, Mr. Carothers said, “I think we see in events here echoes of events in other regions, and sometimes those echoes are very evocative. We see a picture of young people out in Tarir square protesting and it reminds us of pictures we have seen in other countries and regions where young people have been protesting.” Mr. Carothers continued by exploring the similarities between large scale, peaceful protests, saying that, for the most part, they all look and feel alike. The key difference between revolutions lies not in these large-scale, peaceful protests, but rather the regimes against which they are pushing. The same protest dynamic can assert itself against the government of Czechoslovakia in 1988 or 1989, and then a similar movement can assert itself against Egyptian government in 2011, with each revolution yielding very different outcomes. The outcomes themselves depend on the assertiveness and nature of the regime. “Its like you can be looking from a window into a forest and then suddenly a very strong wind comes along and the same wind is affecting all of those trees and some of them fall over and some of them stay standing,” explained Mr. Carothers. “You have to look carefully and analyze what is the rock in the regime that will make it fall over when the wind hits. And there you really have to look carefully at legitimacy. What is it that makes a regime legitimate?” Public protest itself is a

challenge to the legitimacy of a regime. It sends those in power the message that if they want to continue running the country, they have to make fundamental changes to the relationship they have developed between themselves and their people. When a regime's legitimacy is tested, it is forced to draw upon whatever sources of legitimacy it has, and if it doesn't have many, its only resort is to increase repression. The regime calls the police, internal security forces, or army to push the people back. Once a regime starts reacting violently against its people in order to gain some semblance of control, its political legitimacy is basically nonexistent, and its future is deeply in question. "Once a regime has to resort to killing innocent people in the middle of the afternoon in a public square, you know a regime's back is to the wall and it is in serious, serious trouble," said Mr. Carothers.

Mr. Carothers then analyzed Arab presidential regimes backed by military power, specifically the Libyan and Egyptian governments that are in the midst of revolution. These regimes have not been electorally legitimated and are often family regimes in the sense that their supreme power is passed from father to sons. Through his research, Mr. Carothers has found that these presidential regimes are most similar to the regimes in sub-Saharan Africa. "The Sudan region has had the most similar record in the kinds of regimes facing public protests," he explained. When one examines sub-Saharan Africa, he gets a mixed picture of optimism and pessimism. Some African countries have done relatively well in the sense that certain changes over the last twenty years have moved them towards a political system that looks like democracy. However, other sub-Saharan African countries have experienced a reconsolidation of authoritarian rule because their governments have been successful in absorbing the protests, pretending to respond to them, and gradually squeezing the air out of the rebellions, allowing the system to return to what it was before. Moreover, some of these African governments have broken down under the pressure of the rebellion and fallen into civil conflict that often leads to civil wars. "I think all three of these outcomes that we have seen in sub-Saharan Africa - somewhat success, consolidation and failure, and complete break down - can already be seen in these Arab revolutions, and I think its likely that we will see al of these different outcomes play out in the region in the next ten years," said Mr. Carothers.

However, Mr. Carothers emphasized the fact that, when studying comparative politics, one must not make predictions simply because politics is unpredictable. Human events and human beings do not operate along the laws of science, but rather along the unpredictable laws

of human psychology. While Mr. Carothers thinks that one can certainly say that certain countries seem to be in a better condition than others to develop into an ordered and pluralistic society, statements like these are not actually predictions, just a recognition of underlying factors and conditions of that particular state. Mr. Carothers pointed to India as an example of a state that unpredictably developed into a sustainable democracy. “If you look at emerging country of India in the early 1940s, there were 400 languages, major religions, high levels of illiteracy, no history of democracy, said Mr. Carothers. “Every single precondition for democracy in India would fail totally. And yet here it is sixty years later as one of the most successful non-Western democracies of the Twentieth century.” Libya is likewise a country that has none of the characteristic preconditions for democracy. Libya is a country divided along strong lines as well as tribes that have never really been able to come together and form a pluralistic government. It has always been one group that has ruled over the others. Mr. Carothers believes that changing the basic pattern and social order that has been internalized in the Libyan political system is going to be really difficult. “First of all, they can stay in that conflict for a very long time, second, even if one group manages to win over the other, getting them to govern in a different way is going to be hard,” explained Mr. Carothers. However, even though Libya is not very well positioned for democratic development, it does not mean it is impossible for it to become a democracy. There are sub-Saharan African states that have tribal divisions as well as no history of democracy that have managed to come through and have some pluralism. While certain factors can point in one particular direction, there are no absolute predictions.

Mr. Carothers then began talking about the various factors that ripen the political condition of a country and allow it to blossom into a democracy. “You first need a sense of a national identity that individuals can subscribe to that is parallel to whatever local identity that they maintain,” said Mr. Carothers. Even though each person is individually a member of a tribe, these people also need a national identity to make them feel as if they are a part of the larger political project. However, the forging of this identity is complicated, with it normally being forged in a nation-building phase when a traditional society is being turned into a nation-state. The second factor that Mr. Carothers mentioned was that there had to be a balance of forces within the country so that no one group is strong enough to step over or step on another. Rule of law is forged out of a balance of power because it forces each group to basically negotiate the nature of their relationship with each other. The third factor that would allow for a transition to

democracy is a certain amount of enlightened leadership. “You need to have some good fortune for the people who emerge in power. It can make a huge difference,” said Mr. Carothers. The creation of a democracy likewise becomes easier if there is a neighborhood of surrounding countries that sustain and support a democratic ideal. Having a support system of strong international friends also ensures an easier road to democracy. Mr. Carothers emphasized again that even though this list may seem objective, those studying developing countries must maintain a level of humility when it comes to predictions.

A New Pride in Arab Identity

When asked how the political upheaval in the Middle East has transformed Arab identity, Mr. Carothers responded by saying, “I think Arab identity has gotten a boost in the sense that young people have shown that they can take their destiny into their own hands.” The generation of youth that has participated in and driven these revolutions have shown tremendous courage and endured immense suffering. Because in most cases they have endured these hardships peacefully and with dignity, the Arab youth are experiencing a new pride. Even though there are deep national differences among countries in the region, Mr. Carothers explained that there is a pan-Arab feeling associated with this solidarity. “There is a certain sense that these Arab countries are watching each other, learning from each other, and in some instances copying each other’s actions,” said Mr. Carothers. This has been facilitated by the fact that there is now pan-Arab television, as well as increasing access to different means of communication that did not exist in the region more than ten years ago.

However, Mr. Carothers believes that the Arab identity has re-emerged stronger than before from these revolutions, he does not believe that Islam will take a large role in the reformation of these Arab societies. “Islam already plays a deep role in institutions, in laws, in ideas, as well as people’s daily lives,” said Mr. Carothers. “Most Arab societies have experienced an increase in the last twenty or thirty years in the role of Islam in their societies, and to some extent in their political lives. So it is there and it will be a part of the transitions.” The presence of Islam in Arab societies itself should not be questioned, but rather whether or not political actors who act in the name of Islam will play a dominate role in these political systems. What will be the nature of the role that they play? Will it be compatible with pluralism? Will they allow others to share the power? Even though there have been a lot of scare scenarios where

these actors will dominate and be incapable of accepting pluralism, Mr. Carothers does not believe that these actors will take a dominant role in most Arab political societies. While these actors are appealing because they have not been corrupted by power in the way that political actors have and they kind of have a coherent social ideal, they are incoherent as to what an Islamic order would look like for economic policy, and other elements of society. Moreover, Mr. Carothers pointed out that Islamic leaders are not naturally in a dominant political position because the revolutions themselves were not Islamist revolutions. They were revolutions for freedom, dignity, and justice. While Islamists feel that they can associate with these cults and feel solidarity with them, they cannot take credit for breaking apart the old order.

Policy Must Reflect Reality

When asked whether or not a consistent policy approach to each Arab country in revolution would be more effective than the Obama Administration's current mixed policy approach, Mr. Carothers simply stated that "Well, reality is not very coherent, and policy has to respond to reality." Mr. Carothers thinks that the most effective way to approach the region in question is to have an overall principle or associated objective and then pursue this objective on a case-by-case basis. The overall principle that frames the Obama Administration's policies in the Middle East is that democratic reform would be good for the region generally, and that the United States should support it. "I think the administration was a little slow to come to that principle because there were so many reasons to be wary of the political instability in the region," said Mr. Carothers. "And now that they have raised that principle you have to ask are they applying it as diligently in Libya as they are in Bahrain?" The United States has to be tough on these governments while maintaining their existing relationships in the region. Mr. Carothers feels that the Obama Administration needs to figure out how to lean harder against regimes that are in need of reform. "But I think the government has the right over all principle, and just need to work it out on a case by case basis to make it more consistent," clarified Mr. Carothers. The same principle pursued by Obama Administration can have different applications because of their definition of democratic reform, what this definition means for a specific country, and what this definition means for their interests in that country. Inconsistency of application is less alarming than consistency in principle. "The struggle here," said Mr. Carothers, "is to show that we are really serious about the principle."

Mr. Carothers also mentioned that it is imperative that the United States learn to be more accepting of people being democratically elected in the region that we are uncomfortable with. Mr. Carothers pointed to the United States' reaction to the elections in the 2006 Palestinian elections as an example of their democratic discomfort. " Hamas was a very tough case in the 2006 elections because it was not just a not very democratic group of people, but a group in armed struggle with Israel," said Mr. Carothers. "I think it is still possible to oppose Hamas, but to do so by working within the Palestinian political system that would not have said that we refuse the government structure which Hamas takes part in some way or against any compromise or solution in which Palestine and Hamas work together." Mr. Carothers believes it is absolutely necessary that the United States find a way to show that they are comfortable living with the results of Palestinian democracy. The United States does not have to accept it or embrace it, but realize that it was the Palestinian's choice, and this choice has to be respected. "It is examples like these that makes the world believe that the United States is not very serious about democracy," stated Mr. Carothers. "It seems like whenever we make a choice that we are not comfortable with, we immediately undermine that choice." The United States has to learn to live with people they do not like, and, as Mr. Carothers said, if "we do not accept this early on, we will come to grief."