

Interview - Marina Ottaway

Written by E-International Relations

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Marina Ottaway is an analyst of political transformations and political reconstruction in African, Balkan, and Middle East countries. Currently she is a Senior Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center and is working on a project that focuses on countries in the Arab world which experienced uprisings in 2011 and on Iraq. Previously she was a Senior Associate in the Carnegie Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, working on issues associated with political transformation in the Middle East and Gulf security. Prior to working at the Endowment, she conducted research in Africa and the Middle East and taught at Georgetown University, the John Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies, the American University in Cairo, the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, the University of Zambia, and Addis Ababa University. Her extensive research experience is reflected in her numerous publications, which include nine authored books and six edited books, such as *Yemen on the Brink* (co-edited with Christopher Boucek), *Getting to Pluralism: Political Actors in the Arab World* (co-edited with Amr Hamzawy), and *Funding Virtue: Civil Society Aid and Democracy Promotion* (co-edited with Thomas Carothers).

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I do not think there are any particularly new and exciting approaches in the field of international relations. In fact, I am struck by the fact that the enormous changes that have taken place in the world in the last decades have not been accompanied by the development of a new framework for analysis and policy-making. To a large extent, we are still stuck in a Cold War mentality. This is reflected both in the policies and in the scholarship. We were comfortable with the Cold War framework and we are trying to maintain it, casting other countries, most notably China, in the role the Soviet Union used to occupy.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

The most significant change has been the closing of the wealth and, to some extent, power gap between the United States and the rest of the world. At the end of World War II and at the beginning of the Cold War, the United States was immeasurably ahead of the rest of the world in terms of wealth, political influence, and military power. The United States still leads in terms of military power, but it has lost the superiority in terms of wealth and influence because many more countries are standing on their own feet. The world has not adjusted to this situation yet. In the United States, there is a tendency to see the decrease in US influence as the result of the faulty policies of particular administrations, rather than of systemic shifts brought about by economic development in other countries. But the rest of the world also has trouble adjusting to the new situation. There remains a widespread expectation that the US could solve the problems of other countries if it chooses, or conversely that everything bad is the fault of the United States. This is where, as scholars, we need to develop new models – the issue is not the decline of the United States, but the reality of a richer and more complex world. And many countries have to learn to take more responsibility for their own problems. In terms of my thinking, I am aware of the changes, but I have not developed a new model for understanding the situation.

How important is the US's role in attempts to counter the Islamic State? Would you consider their efforts effective?

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The so-called Islamic State has three different aspects. One is the Islamic State as a territorial entity, controlling and trying to govern parts of Syria and Iraq. Because of its military superiority, the United States can play a role against this Islamic State. It is already doing so by bombing IS positions and, to a lesser extent, by offering training to the Iraqi Army and, supposedly, moderate Syrian organizations. Even in this role, however, the United States has competition – it remains to be seen whether the anti-IS military role of the United States is more important than that of Iran. The second aspect of the Islamic State is the network of extremist organizations that extends through many countries. The US can play a role here, together with the intelligence services of many other countries, in trying to understand and then weaken these networks, but the United States does not have a particular advantage or superiority in this battle. The third aspect of the Islamic State is its attraction to young people in many countries. It is a problem rooted in the socio-economic problems of each country, and each country has to tackle it for itself. The US cannot fight the attractiveness of IS for young Britons or Saudis; it can only fight its attractiveness in the United States.

Does US policy towards the Islamic State signify any changes in US foreign policy since the war in Iraq in 2003?

Yes, the United States went to war in Iraq with a great deal of self-confidence based on ignorance. The US is trying to deal with the Islamic State with the caution engendered by the early debacle and a much more realistic view of what it can or cannot accomplish.

Have the uprisings in 2011 had an impact on US attempts to promote democracy and civil society in the Arab world? Do you see similar changes in other regions?

Democracy promotion, no matter the rhetorical statement, has a low priority in US policy at this point. Washington continues to fund NGOs that implement small-scale democracy promotion programs, while putting very little pressure on governments it considers reliable allies to behave more democratically. The United States, for example, switched very quickly in 2013 from supporting the elected Egyptian president, although he was a Muslim Brother, to accepting a military coup and refusing to acknowledge it was a coup.

What are some of the difficulties or weaknesses for secular parties or movements in the Arab world, and how much do these issues differ from those with an alternative focus?

Secular political parties in most Arab countries are founded and controlled by members of an elite that has been close to the circles of power for decades and feels entitled to rule. They have made amazingly little effort to reach out to the vast, poor population. They have not developed a language, and even less a program, to address the issues of economic survival that consume most people. Thus, they have very small constituencies and are, by and large, terrified of elections, even while they advocate democracy. Much of the hatred of secular parties for Islamists is not based on ideology, but on the fear that Islamists have popular support.

Can you outline any instances in which secular parties or movements have been strengthened or weakened as a result of the 2011 uprisings?

Secular parties were initially weakened by the uprisings. In free elections, they could not compete against Islamist parties, as we saw in Egypt, Tunisia, and even Morocco. Mistakes made by Islamist parties in Tunisia, the fact that power is still in the hands of the king in Morocco, and the return of the military in Egypt later weakened the Islamist parties, but did not strengthen the secular parties, which depend on the protection of the king in Morocco or the military in Egypt. Tunisia is, to some extent, the exception: Nida Tounes won the elections on its own, but Nida Tounes is an unstable coalition that may not last.

Are you optimistic about the prospects for stability or democracy in Egypt? Is any of the momentum from the 2011 uprisings still visible?

I am pessimistic about both. The military has put an end to the democratic experiment. But stability is elusive; there is

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both a lot of discontent driven by socio-economic problems and a lot of violence driven by extremist Islamists that have gotten stronger after the coup.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Politics?

Study concrete situations, not theories.

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This interview was conducted by Jane Kirkpatrick. Jane is Associate Features Editor at E-IR.