

Denison roundtable discusses rapidly evolving Middle East

Written by

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GRANVILLE -- Americans should not be so hopeful about the brand of democracy now apparently budding in some Middle Eastern countries, and Al Jazeera is more fair and balanced than the American media.

Those were just two of the assessments Thursday during a roundtable discussion at Denison University titled "Revolution in the Middle East."

"We are all hopeful for what's going on in the Middle East," said Sohrab Behdad, a Denison University professor and holder of the John H. Harris Chair in Economics, "but I'm not so sure the Americans should be so hopeful for it because if it is successful and these countries are going to be run democratically, you're not going to be happy about the positions they're going to take."

Behdad, an expert in international finance, Middle Eastern economies and Iranian society, was one of four panelists.

He was joined by Walker F. Todd, an attorney, economic consultant and a member of the negotiating team that obtained the release of 52 U.S. hostages from Iran in 1981; Fadhel Kaboub, a Denison University assistant professor of economics who also is a recognized expert in international finance, as well as an authority on North Africa and the Middle East; and Pierre Dairon, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Virginia who spent two years in Morocco working for the French foreign ministry.

Since 1998, Todd has been a visiting research fellow and instructor for the American Institute for Economic Research in Great Barrington, Mass.

Todd said countries such as Algeria and Pakistan are watching closely to see if revolt will spill to them, but, he predicted, Pakistan won't have a revolt.

Instead, he said, "I think there they will do an end run around true revolution and go straight to country-splitting civil war."

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"And I don't think in Afghanistan you have enough of an educated, Western-oriented middle class that would support an uprising against the current government," Todd said.

But Todd wondered why Americans didn't protest more when Congress passed the Troubled Asset Relief Program, commonly referred to as TARP, a few years ago.

"I was outraged and I couldn't understand. Why wasn't the public so outraged as to stage a Cairo-style protest?" Todd said. "Then six months later, the tea parties began to emerge. In effect, they were the right movement against what's wrong in Washington, but arguably against the wrong target. Remember: The initial tea party movement was targeted against the health care bill. The very idea of people taking to the streets to defend the existing health system was an outrage."

"Only in a country so misled that it cannot possibly understand where its own true interests lie," Todd said. "No European and no educated Middle Easterner would make that mistake. If nothing else, they do know where their own true interests lie, and when pushed they will take to the streets to defend those interests."

Part of the reason for that, the panelists agreed, is because the American media has done a substandard job of informing the American people. Al Jazeera, an Arabic news and current affairs satellite TV channel headquartered in Doha, Qatar, they said, does a much better job.

"Most people think about Al Jazeera as this biased, pro-Arab, anti-American kind of network, and that's not the case," Kaboub said to the small crowd in the President's Room at the Denison library. "So the Arab population is getting a fair and balanced kind of discussion on Al Jazeera. It's not just radical, leftist, Islamist. They're giving everyone their fair share at the table."

Kaboub also pondered the next step in revolution.

"I think the slogan in Tunisia tells a lot: jobs, freedom and dignity," Kaboub said. "And it's really the dignity part that overrides everything else. In Tunisia, people don't necessarily hate the rich, but they have a problem when the rich go after them to oppress them, physically, not just financially, and that's what starts a revolt."

The discussion was sponsored by the Gilpatrick Center, the university's Department of Economics and the Global Studies Seminar Series.

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