

# 'Arab Spring' focus of USAWC symposium

Thomas Zimmerman, Army War College Public Affairs

## 'Arab Spring' focus of USAWC symposium



Dr. Fawaz  
Gerges,  
professor of  
Middle Eastern  
Politics and  
International  
Relations at the

London School of Economics and Political Science, served as the keynote speaker for Arab Spring Symposium at the Army War College. Photo by Megan Clugh.

Want to see the presentations? Check out the USAWC YouTube page.

(<http://www.youtube.com/usarmywarcollege>)

Jan. 31, 2012 – The development known as Arab Spring began with a Tunisian fruit seller’s response to a police officer, setting off protests began that day in Sidi Bouzid, and captured by cell phone cameras and shared on the Internet. The event set off similar uprisings across North Africa and across the Middle East that became known as the “Arab Spring.”

These events and the lasting effects served as the focus of the Arab Spring Symposium held Jan. 30-31 at the Army War College.

“These protests are a powerful and compelling event that only comes along occasionally in world affairs,” said Dr. Larry Goodson, director of Middle East Studies at the USAWC. “Moments such as these are rare and are deserving of our close attention,” he said as background to the two-day symposium for Army War College student body

Invited guests from local and national universities and government and civilian agencies broaden the range of discussions. Guest speakers brought up complex issues and challenges to discuss back in seminar. This symposium is the latest in a decade-long tradition where the USAWC pauses to explore a region in a focused fashion, he said

Some of the highlights from guest speakers were:

- **High unemployment and failed political systems** as key contributors to the events, said Dr. Fawaz Gerges, professor of Middle Eastern Politics and International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science, served as the keynote speaker for the event.
- **The quest for change trumps the quest for democracy,** said Amb. Ferry de Kerckhove, former Canadian Ambassador to Egypt. “It is more of a Western aspiration for the region, but could come as a by-product of the revolution. We need to remind ourselves that we are in this for the long haul. It may take a long time for some stability.”
- **The world is seeing the crumbling of the official authoritarianism in the Arab world** -- but will be a complex journey, said Gerges. “This is the first time in that millions of Arab feel free and have taken ownership of their own destiny. The politics of the past that dominated the world have change forever. It is a new era. “
- **Globalization**, including the availability of news outlets like Aljazeera played a large role. “Aljazeera helped break these nations control on the flow of information,” said Gerges. “It helped shed the light on systemic corruption in many of these nations.”

“Nearly 70 percent of homes in the Middle East and North Africa have satellite TV and nearly 40 percent of people use the internet daily,” said Dr. Glenn Robinson, associate professor, Naval Postgraduate School. “It became impossible to control the information for these regimes. This information revolution in the Middle East that has created an “Arab Public” that is literate, able to follow news, form opinions, and have avenues to express it really for the first time this century.”

- **Demographics played an important factor.** “A ‘youth bulge’ exists in many of the nations in this region where nearly 50 percent of all Arabs have been born since the 1990-91 Gulf War and two-thirds have been born since Iranian Revolution,” said Robinson. “In addition the literacy rates have grown drastically since the 1970s. The ability to get an education and to follow world news has had a dramatic effect on the region.”
- **Fragile and non-existent institutions** will help determine the future of the region. “There are major risks and vulnerabilities including fragile and non-existent institutions,” said Gerges. “How do you replace the family-based system with new institution, from the bottom up? It takes about 80-years to build and consolidate institutions. In the absence of these how do you mitigate the great conflicts in society? How do you build them with secular religious divides? How do you provide food and services without money?”
- **Professional militaries** will have a role. “The more professional the military, the more likely it is to side with protest if disorder threatens the country,” said Dr. David Sorenson, Professor of International Security Studies, Air War College. he said. “In turn, the more ‘rent-seeking’ the military is, the more it is willing to defend the existing government. We sometimes underestimate the role of the military in these situations.”

Sorenson said that professional militaries know they cannot solve their countries problems, instead they form a formal agreement with the government as they transition towards democracy.

“If you look at Egypt you can see this in action,” he said. “You see a professional military responding to the wishes of its people as it

tries to speed up the scheduling of elections. Egypt is a good barometer of the region.”

Other expert speakers included **Dr. David Commins**, professor of history and Benjamin Rush Distinguished Chair in Liberal Arts and Science at Dickinson College, and **Amb. James Larocco**, director of the Near East South Asia (NESAs) Center for Strategic Studies.

To view the presentations visit our YouTube Channel at [www.youtube.com/usarmywarcollege](http://www.youtube.com/usarmywarcollege) (<http://www.youtube.com/usarmywarcollege>)

U.S. Army War College Archives - News Article - 31 January 2012