April 23 - 25, 2015

The Prince Alwaleed Center for American Studies and Research at The American University of Cairo (AUC) hosted a three-day retreat at the Mövenpick Resort in Ain Sokhna titled "The American Century in Retrospect: Rethinking U.S.-Middle East Relations."

The main presenters were five professors: Magda Shahin, Mustapha Al-Sayyid, Mounira Soliman and Allison Hodgkins. Sandrine Gamblin, director of AUC’s Center for Middle Eastern Studies, moderated the retreat. The retreat included 17 graduate students who come from diversified academic backgrounds and different geographical locations and universities.

On Thursday, April 23, the first day of the retreat, an introductory session was held from 4:30 to 6 pm. After an initial welcoming note, there was a demonstration of how the workshop was going to function and what was to be expected from the participants. The graduate students were asked to introduce themselves and to give a short account on the reason they attended the retreat and their expectations. Then, they were divided into multidisciplinary groups, each one coached by a professor. Each group was assigned the task of writing a paper related to the title of the workshop. The papers would be presented on the last day of the retreat.

On Friday, April 24, four presentations were given. The first, titled “U.S., China, Russia and the Regional Powers: Rivalry and Competitiveness in the Middle East Region” was given by Magda Shahin, director of the Prince Alwaleed Center for American Studies and Research. The presentation set out to examine whether the rising Middle Eastern regional powers would have a say in deciding matters in the region or if the Sykes-Picot Agreement would prevail, meaning that the coordination between the super powers in the region would be decisive regardless of their position.

Shahin traced the beginning of U.S. interference in the Middle East, starting from the Suez Canal crisis in 1956. She referred to the fact that it was Egypt that started the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union by opening its doors to the Soviets. Shahin then referred to Egypt's policy during Sadat’s presidency, focusing on the year 1973, in which he asked the Soviets to leave Egypt, a crucial moment in U.S.-Soviet rivalry in the Middle East. The Soviets were further marginalized by Kissinger’s policy, a policy that informed them but kept them uninvolved. Camp David denoted further exclusion of the Soviet Union.

Shahin highlighted the fact that the Soviet Union and the United States drew closer to each other during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, to the point where the Soviet Union actually supported the U.S. Security Council’s decision to withdraw from Iraq. Moreover, the entente between the two superpowers was manifested through the co-sponsored Madrid conference.

Shahin demonstrated how the Bush-Baker administration heralded a New World Order, turning the U.S. into a super power for the first ten years after the end of the Cold War. However, at the end of the decade, things started to change. China became a rising power and Russia became frustrated with its secondary role. Shahin highlighted the fact that China’s appeal is its non-conditionality and noninterference in domestic affairs; it projected itself as a developing country.

Shahin argues that Russia, dissatisfied with its secondary role, benefitted from the presence of Anti-Americanism. Russia wanted to have a hand in shaping the region. China and Russia are ready, in case the U.S. disengages, to fill the power vacuum. Russia invests in regional powers like Iran and Syria in order to secure its place in the Middle East. The rising power of BRICS, Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, threatens to replace U.S. dominance with multiport consensus; the U.S. ceased to be the unilateral dominating power.

Shahin remarks that it is not only the global powers but also the regional powers that are maneuvering skillfully in the region. The establishment of a rapid Arab deployment force is considered a breakthrough. Iran is also re-emerging as a geopolitical power. The U.S. has assessed its role in the region and chosen a framework that protects its interests and keeps regional powers within the circle.

Shahin concludes by asking whether the partnership between Russia and China is solid and can withstand current challenges. She points to the fact that the threat from the U.S. and the West is the force that drives the Sino-Russian relations closer. At the same time, neither Russia nor China are willing to be open rivals of the U.S. for the risk of losing U.S. and European markets.

Shahin's presentation was followed by discussion questions. One of the questions posed concerns regarding the impact of such rivalry on the region. Shahin addressed the question by shedding light on the benefits of having a multipolar system in the Middle East.

**Second presentation**

Mustapha Al-Sayyid, political science faculty member at AUC, was the second speaker, his presentation addressed the decline of  the U.S. as a hegemonic power in the Middle East.

Al-Sayyid focused on the theoretical aspect of hegemony, particularly establishment and maintenance. He highlighted the fact that many theories regard the presence of a hegemon as necessary for international world order. The hegemon uses its military and economic power to impose global rules and act as a general source of assistance to other countries, helping them abide by the rules of the international system. ElSayed refers to America and England as an example of an old hegemon that gave birth to a new hegemon.

Al-Sayyid then distinguishes between hegemony and domination. Hegemonic power does not necessitate the use of force, whereas force is a must in domination. Hegemony is established through the consent of the people. The U.S. after World War II emerged as a hegemonic power with Japan, Germany, South Korea and Great Britain trailing close behind.

Al-Sayyid refers to the present decline of the U.S. as a hegemonic power and argues that there are economic, monetary and military indications. Moreover, the U.S. no longer manipulates international organizations such as the UN, IMF and World Bank. Finally, the U.S.’  model society is challenged inside and outside its borders. ElSayed highlights the fact that the opposition to the decline theory focuses on the U.S.’s soft power counterbalancing its decline in hard power. English language and American culture are two factors that enhance and facilitate the spread of U.S. influence throughout the world.

Nevertheless, ElSayed sheds light on the different forces that hav challenged the U.S. in the region or acted freely without consulting with the U.S. He gave the examples of Hezbollah and Jabhat al-Nusra, Israel’s Netanyahu and his speech in the U.S. Congress without consent from the American president, and Turkey's refusal to allow U.S. troops to pass through its territory into Iraq. This refusal comes at a time in which the Turkish government has allowed militants to cross their borders to join ISIS. Even the U.S.’ best allies in the region, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, initiated the” Decisive Storm” without U.S. approval. ElSayed concludes by saying that the evident decline of U.S. hegemony offers a good opportunity for countries in the Middle East to device their own policies and serve their own interests

The last part of the presentation was allotted to discussion questions. One of the questions raised was about the perception of the U.S. in the region; ElSayed's answer was that the people in those regions have a negative view of the U.S., especially those in countries with U.S. friendly governments like Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey.

**Third presentation**

The third session was a presentation titled “The U.S. President and Congress: U.S. Policy Making” by Allison Hodgkins, assistant professor of International Security and Conflict Management,

Hodgkins argued that the Arab leaders count on their ability to persuade American presidents of the importance of the Arab World to U.S. foreign policy. While this approach is justified because the President is the one who administers foreign policy, the relationship between him, Congress, and the voting public is complex.

Hodgkins admits that there is a decline in U.S. power in the region as illustrated when it withdrew from Iraq and Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the U.S. is still the decisive power in the region. There are indicators that U.S. foreign policy in the region is unclear and disorderly, but the facts assert that the U.S. is still the most powerful global power; it has the largest economy in the world, large population, large solid defensible homeland and is the dominant military power even without nuclear power.

Contrary to ElSayed's argument, Hodgkins argues that in terms of influence things have not changed much in the region in regards to U.S. hard and soft power or in terms of its influence on events taking place in the region.

Hodgkins refers to a major course correction in U.S. foreign policy; it is being shaped inline with national interest and domestic consensus, the President and the majority of the voting public want to disengage. Hodgkins demonstrates that U.S. failure in Iraq has eroded its hard and soft power. China and Russia benefitted from U.S. miscalculations. The present change in foreign policy is a form of recognition of that disaster and a deliberate attempt and redesign to correct it.

Hodgkins highlights the fact that the U.S. strategic interests in the region are global oil market stability, steadiness in global trade and minimization of threats to U.S. homeland. The rapprochement with Iran is a clear indication of the newly adopted U.S. foreign policy that involves no engagement in new wars in the Middle East. Even the republicans, who criticize the deal with Iran, make it clear that their opposition does not mean they advocate war. Their main purpose is to gain more supporters since they are fully aware that the voting public is against war. Hodgkins then explicates that it would be difficult for the next president to support Israel if it continues to behave in ways that destabilize the region.

Hodgkins remarks that the leaders of the Arab world have more influence on U.S. public opinion than they realize. She concludes that although it is right to engage with the U.S. president and state department, it is also important to address the public because foreign policy is a reflection of what the public wants. Basically the public wants to retain its military and economic power without the expense of costly entanglements abroad.

The presentation lasted for 30 minutes and 45 minutes were allotted to discussion questions. One of the questions posed was how U.S. foreign policy deals with terrorism with regards to military intervention in Syria and Iraq, especially as Daesh continues to threaten core U.S. interests and stability in the region. Hodgkins' answer was that the United States tries to contain ISIS but the U.S. is not sending ground troops. The U.S. hopes that ISIS will unify its Sunni allies and that that will take care of the situation.

**Fourth Presentation**

The fourth session tackled the cultural aspect of  U.S.-Middle East relations. Mounira Soliman, associate director of the Prince Alwaleed Center for American Studies and Research, gave a presentation titled"  “U.S. Cultural Representation”. Soliman examined the American image in Egypt; the Egyptian Revolution, the U.S. response to the Revolution and how this response was interpreted in Tahrir Square.

Soliman discusses the three sides of the triangle that bind together the official U.S. response to the January 25 Revolution, the official Egyptian response, and the popular Egyptian response. Soliman sets the tone for the presentation as she demonstrates that it is a critique of the U.S. image. An image of vandalism of Americana food chains in Tahrir Square is displayed, Soliman argues that that broken image of the U.S. was hard to miss in Tahrir Square; it was a visual representation of how Egyptians felt towards the U.S.’ position on the Egyptian revolution. The U.S’ attempt to appeal to the regime, the different political powers and the people, were reflected in Hilary Clinton's response of supporting change without any clear commitment. Clinton’s statement sent out mixed messages and allowed the U.S. to maintain multiple contradictory relationships with conflicting parties. However, those mixed messages were not lost on the Arab population, Soliman argues. The popular reaction was a "campaign of hatred" by the people and not the governments against the United States.

It is apparent that Soliman’s argument is in harmony with Elsie’s as both speakers focus on the decline of the U.S. image in the Middle East. Soliman refers to a change in the image of America from the symbol of independence, freedom and equal opportunities in the first half of the 20th century, to the embodiment of disillusionment and false hope at present. Obama's speech in Cairo university in 2009,which glorified America “as a nation born out of revolution against an empire and founded upon the ideal that all are created equal “was received with guarded optimism, which the popular Egyptian singer Shaaban AbdelRehim translated in his famous song on Obama. Soliman states that two years after his Cairo speech nothing has changed with regards to U.S. foreign policy.

Soliman sheds light on the Egyptian official response as expressed and propagated by the State media; the claim that foreign conspiracies were behind the revolution and that protesters were bribed and manipulated. Each protestor is given a 100 dollars and a meal from Kentucky Fried Chicken in return for agreeing to go to Tahrir Square. The protestors referred to themselves as the Kentucky Dudes and even sang, "We are the Kentucky Dudes", which exposes their awareness of the political game played at their expense.

Soliman also refers to Amin Haddad's poem "Once Upon a Time" published  in 2004, condemning  U.S. invasion of Iraq and the passivity of the Arab nations in the face of such aggression. Haddad rewrote the poem to suit the Revolutionary spirit; although it starts with the same note, the new version salutes the rebirth of the Egyptian and Arab nation.

The U.S. official response that disappointed the protestors led to a revival of songs that emerged in a different context but were quite relevant to the revolutionary moment, Soliman demonstrates. When Wisner was sent as U.S. envoy, Tahrir city was in full swing and the protestors resorted to 1950's and 1970's songs. The response to Wisner's remarks, which made the U.S. administration distance itself and state that they were made in personal capacity, was manifested in the popular songs heard in the square. The duet Ahmed Fouad Negm and Sheikh Emam's song, Nixon Baba, which was produced in the context of Nixon's visit in 1964, was used to parody Wisner's visit and to highlight the corruption of U.S. administration, embodied through the figures of Nixon and Wisner.

Soliman concludes by referring to Ahdaf Soueif's memoir *Cairo My City Our Revolution*. Soueif meditates on how easy it was for the revolution to turn into a violent spectacle had not the Egyptians insisted on keeping it peaceful, it was a struggle between a tenacious brutal corrupt government and a great body of citizens armed with nothing except words, music, legitimacy and hope. Soliman remarks that other people worldwide were inspired and their empathy caused their governments to change their disposition towards the revolution.

Soliman's presentation was followed by discussion questions. In answer to a question about the root of American negative response in Egypt, Soliman identified the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and U.S. support of authoritarian regimes in the region as the main causes.

Saturday, April 25, the third day of the retreat, was devoted to group presentations. Each group chose a presenter. Five minutes were allotted to questions at the end of each presentation.

**Group One:**

A reflection paper on how Egyptian American relations are reflected in Egyptian national music from Nasser era to post- January 25 Revolution.

**Group Two:**

A policy paper presented by Ghaza Institute for Middle East Studies which offers policy suggestions for Saudi officials.

**Group Three:**

This group presented a policy paper presenting recommendations to the U.S. government on how to change the negative image of U.S. in the Middle East without compromising U.S. interests.

**Group Four:**

The topic of this presentation was "The changing image of the U.S. in the eyes of the Middle East"

Group four focused on five areas; scientific research, public policy, movies, political cartoons and literature.

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