“Islamism and the Arab Spring”
Foreign Policy Research Institute
Reserve Officers Association
Monday, May 14, 2012, 2:00 am–4:00 pm
One Constitution Ave, NE, Washington, D.C.

On Monday, the Foreign Policy Research Institute and the Reserve Officers Association hosted a discussion titled “Islamism and the Arab Spring.” While many of the protest movement associate with the Arab Spring appeared to be largely secular in nature, Islamist parties have been winning elections across the region, causing unease and uncertainty both domestically and abroad. This turn of events has divided U.S. policymakers and analysts. A question posed was “how should the U.S. deal with the new regimes that bear a distinctly Islamist character?” The discussion featured Michael Doran, senior at Brookings Institute, Samuel Helfont, PhD from Princeton University, Marina Ottaway senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace’s Middle East Program and Eric Trager, from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. The discussion was moderated by Tally Helfont, from the Foreign Policy Research Institute.

Michael Doran refuted the idea that Islamism could be a threat to the U.S. The four strategic threats for the U.S. are: weapons of mass destruction, counterterrorism, protection of Israel, and democracy promotion. Regarding oil, the Persian region is relatively stable. Doran added that Islamist do not have weapon of mass destruction. However, the rise of Salafism during the last decades led to the outgrowth of al-Qaeda and militants embracing terrorism. Meanwhile, Doran discussed the process of marginalization of al-Qaeda, which has already taken place as civilians disagree with the terrorist attacks that could blindness kill victims in population centers. Salafists making gains in the political process has also pushed al-Qaeda to the periphery. On protecting Israel; Hamas is not in a better position since the Arab Spring, as they are loosing one of their strongest allies, Syria. However, it will be more difficult to protect Israel because of the leadership change in Egypt. However, for the moment there is no will of renegotiating the 1978 Camp David Accord. The situation would be more complex if a great power (ex. China) would take the lead of a coalition in the region against Israel and destabilize the U.S. position in the region. Doran concluded that with the Arab Spring, Iran will become more isolated as it looses Syria as its biggest ally.

Samuel Helfont pointed out some incoherence with the Arab Spring. The Syrians are a majority Shia and Sunni, but the regime is secular with a Sunni leadership. The country is now facing an uprising against its secular type of regime; however, Syria is backed by Iran, a theocracy, and supported by Hezbollah. Turkey used to be in a process of reconciliation with Syria, but now abandoned the regime. The GCC is against Syria not because Bashar al Assad is an authoritarian leader, but because the conflict is a proxy war with Iran. Helfont
was concerned that the weapons of mass destruction that the Syrian military possessed should be secured. Helfont warned that the conflict could quickly escalate if the peace was not hold, the aftermath would destabilize the region, weaken Israel, and increase terrorism activity. The U.S should be “explicit” on its intention to resolve the conflict.

Marina Ottaway addressed the belief into conspiracies in the region. Ottaway described the Islamist movements as nationalistic, and specific to countries and are poorly linked all over the region, “there is no chance of creating a Caliphate,” said Ottaway. In the region, the panelist identified two major Islamists political movements the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and the Salafists. The MB are a political party willing to participate to a democratic system, while the Salafist want to recreate an Islamic community. The Salafists recently engage with political participation, and formed the political party al Nour - which received 20 percent of the vote. Ottaway reckoned the superior capacity of Islamist parties to organize - including the Muslim Brotherhood - and their success to engage the population gave them credit, and explained their strong results during the elections. On the other hand, the seculars are poorly organized, disconnected from people’s demands, and divided. In Tunisia, the moderate Islamists represents the new elites that reach to power thanks the Ennahda party. The secular are associated to the elite of the former regime. Ottaway asserted that secular parties should improve their structure and strategy.

Eric Trager pointed out the oxymora in the expression “liberal Islamists,” as there is no progressive claim from Islamists parties. They believe in setting up a theocracy, and that Islamic law should be implemented. Trager admitted that Islamist movements were not all the same, but that they have strong common points. Trager opposed the understanding of the concept of freedom between seculars and Islamists. For the Islamists, freedom is being able to live under the religious law and for this reason a secular regime is oppressive. The seculars argue the opposite. Trager said that the MB are willing to impose strictly the Islamic law in Egypt when the society will be ready for it. The panelist ended the discussion with question, “With Islamists parties ruling Egypt, will they develop a hostile policy against the U.S?”

During the Q&A, Ottaway and Trager opposed each other on the agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood and the future of Egypt. Trager argued that the MB has differing views of what constitutes terrorism than the West, and they do believe Egypt was becoming a theocratic regime. Ottaway responded that the MB were more pragmatic. For instance, last Christmas they asked the military to protect churches. Ottaway reminded the audience that the Islamic law was already in the Egyptian Constitution, and did not specify it deprived Christians of their rights. Doran asserted that Egypt will have to be flexible to continue to attract tourists and foreign investments. Pertaining to the future of Syria, the panelists agree that the current government is severely weakened, at best for itself it would continue to rule but not on all the country and but in any case the regime was slowly collapsing.