

Arab Spring debated and analysed at SAFAS weekend conference

February 14, 2012 12:48 am [0 comments](#) [Sunniva Davies-Rommetveit](#)

One year after the former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak resigned, the St Andrews Foreign Affairs Society (SAFAS) organised a stimulating weekend of discussion and reflection on the ongoing Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. With guest speakers from Sciences Po and the University of Edinburgh, as well as the University of St Andrews' best political researchers, the talks not only discussed regional trends between the uprisings but importantly focused upon specific case studies, including the ongoing Syrian humanitarian crisis.



The first day saw Dr Jean-Pierre Filiu of Sciences Po open the conference by discussing the first year of what he described as not one but many simultaneous regional revolutions still in their prime. The revolutions began in Tunisia after outrage of the treatment of martyr Mohammed Bouazizi, following his desperate act in protest of Tunisia's corrupt political and judicial system. Dr Filiu noted the homogeneity of slogans that called for the fall of corruption, and the resulting reform used by populations throughout the region, which was coupled by the predominance of peaceful and non-violent methods used in the protests. Interestingly, however, he also described notable differences between MENA states, for instance the long-standing dispute of Palestinian self-determination juxtaposed with Israeli wishes for increased security and settlement expansion.

The University of St Andrews' Professor Andrew Williams continued the first day with an insightful history of the influential political decisions made by Britain, France and the United States in World War One. This included Scotland's own Arthur James Balfour increasing Zionist influence in Palestine following the 1917 Balfour Declaration, which continues to be a great source of contention between Israeli and Palestinian communities to this day.



On Sunday, Dr W J Dorman of the University of Edinburgh discussed the lack of land planning and settlement organisation in Cairo, a city in which two thirds of the population live in makeshift settlements without planning permission, and gave insightful reasons for the resentment felt by Egyptians towards the Mubarak regime. This was followed by eyewitness accounts of the Egyptian uprisings, which included those of St Andrews' Union President, Patrick O'Hare, who spent time protesting alongside

Egyptian students in Tahrir Square in January 2011. A discussion of the uprisings' implications on religious and ethnic minorities in the MENA region followed.

Speaking of the conference, the SAFAS conference coordinator, Maxwell Baldi said: "I'm extraordinarily pleased with the results of SAFAS' inaugural conference: the turn out, the lecturers and the social events were all outstanding. After months of hard work from a dedicated team, it's gratifying to see such a successful result."

