TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

Middle East Scholar Lisa Anderson on Leading a University in Cairo During the Arab Spring

Her passion for Middle East studies was ignited during a college course with an intense teacher. She immersed herself in the region's history and language--and has never looked back. For this episode, Prof. Anderson retraces her growing enthusiasm for and deepening knowledge of the Arab world, which saw her break scholarly ground in Libya, take up residence as a professor at American University Cairo, and eventually landed her in the president's office mere weeks before the upheaval of the Arab Spring.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by an anonymous donor. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley White, at hwhite@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Hello, and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. This podcast features conversations with Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who spend one academic year with us. They travel to up to eight Phi Beta Kappa affiliated colleges and universities, partake in the academic in the academic life on campus, and present a lecture on a topic in their field. Lectures are always free and open to the public. For a full schedule, and to learn more about the program, please visit pbk.org. Today, we're trying something new and very exciting. This episode was taped live here at Loyola University in Baltimore, for an intimate audience of students, faculty, and PBK members.

Right now, I have the pleasure of welcoming Professor Lisa Anderson from the Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs. In her distinguished career, Professor Anderson has directed Columbia's Middle East Institute, chaired its Department of Political Science before becoming Dean, and served as President of the American University in Cairo. Her interests in academic work range from state formation in the Middle East and North Africa, to regime change and democratization in developing countries. Welcome, professor.

Lisa Anderson: Thank you very much.

Fred Lawrence: So I want to talk to you about all those important topics. But first, let's start very much in the present. You've been on the Loyola campus now for the last day or so. So tell me what it's been like being here, and what stands out from your visit here to Loyola as a Visiting Scholar for Phi Beta Kappa?

Lisa Anderson: Well, one of the things I've been enjoying about the visits is the extent to which each individual campus has a personality of its own. And one of the characteristics, it seems to me, about Loyola is how committed they are to the student experience. So one of the classes that I met with was actually being held in a student dormitory, and the integration of student life with the academic side of the student experience, and so forth, is clearly something that matters a great deal, and seems to be quite successful. So I did enjoy having a full house for my open lecture last night, but I've just as well enjoyed being able to talk in these sort of smaller intimate groups with the students.

Fred Lawrence: Did you get any questions in any of those smaller intimate groups that were surprising to you?

Lisa Anderson: I actually think the students that I talked to this morning, and we were talking about democracy and authoritarianism and so forth, were quite sophisticated about their sense of the challenges that we all face in the world today as proponents and advocates of democracy.

Fred Lawrence: When did you develop an interest in Middle East politics?

Lisa Anderson: I went off to Sarah Lawrence thinking that I was going to either be a printmaker, which is what I would expect to do at Sarah Lawrence, or I was going to be a civil rights lawyer. And I took, in my freshman year, I took a course with a lawyer, and no offense, but it was really boring.

Fred Lawrence: You just took a course with the wrong lawyer. That's the problem.

Lisa Anderson: So, and I enjoyed printmaking, but it wasn't something that was making my heart race. And I took a course called Politics and Culture in World Affairs. And I hadn't traveled very much outside the United States, and I wasn't very sophisticated about the rest of the world. But I enrolled in this course, and the woman who taught it was quite imperious. She was wonderful, but she was very intimidating, and one of the things she did with her students was essentially assign us places. If we're going around the world, you're going to be the expert on Peru, and so forth and so on. And she gave me Egypt.

Fred Lawrence: And that was perfectly random at that point?

Lisa Anderson: Almost random. I was, you know, I had been a little bit interested in Egypt, but not from any particular reason. And I was supposed to write a 10 page paper; 80 pages later, I had reproduced everything that was in the Sarah Lawrence college library that was about Egypt. And I essentially said, “I'm going to do this until I get bored." And I have. I just, you know, it took off, it just made me feel like there was something I knew. And during the time when I was in college, Nasser died, and I was the family authority on Egypt, and I loved that. So two things happened -- one, I found a domain in which I thought being an expert was really important and interesting, and I also realized that teaching changes the world just as much as anything else you can do. It

just changes the world one person at a time. And so I was also bitten by the idea that one might be an effective teacher, because she was for me, obviously.

Fred Lawrence: So you were going to study Egypt until it got boring? And I'm just guessing it hasn't gotten boring yet.

Lisa Anderson: Exactly. Exactly. I'm still not bored.

Fred Lawrence: How about the language skills that you needed to acquire to make that all happen?

Lisa Anderson: Well, I'm not a talented linguist, let's put it that way, and I had not studied Arabic until I graduated from college. So my Arabic is adequate, not particularly fluent, and I've studied it on and off for the subsequent decades.

Fred Lawrence: When you started doing your work at Fletcher, that was right during the time of the rapprochement between Egypt and Israel and the Camp David Accords, and many things seemed possible in those days and indeed, many things were accomplished in those days. I have a vivid recollection of where I was sitting when Anwar Sadat got off that plane at Ben Gurion Airport. I'm not ashamed to say I had tears in my eyes when he did, and I don't think I was the only one who did. I was seeing something I never thought was possible. Did that affect you as part as your studies and influence you in some way, that whole period?

Lisa Anderson: Well, I think I was already bitten. I was already interested in the region and obviously interested in Egypt. But it was a time when there was enormous sense of possibility. There was ... optimism may be too strong a word. But there really was a sense that this was a region that was on the march, that it was going to become increasingly prosperous, that it was clearly important, not only for its geo-strategic value and its oil, but it was an intrinsically interesting and culturally vibrant region. And I think, frankly, particularly for Americans, the fact that it's beginning to close, the number of countries that I could visit as a graduate student, compared to the number of countries that students can visit today, is heartbreaking.

Fred Lawrence: Give us a sense of some of those countries that you visited, first as a graduate student -- later on, obviously, other places. But I'm really thinking now as a student, as many of our listeners will be.

Lisa Anderson: Well, I did my dissertation research in Tunisia and Libya. And I was the first American social scientist to do research in Libya. And we all expected at the time that this was a generation of people with whom I worked when I was in Libya -- young returnees with new PhDs, who are building universities, and so forth and so on -- that this was the beginning of a prosperous, well-oiled, literally and figuratively, institution-building period in Libya. I ended up being the last American social scientist to do research in Libya. Gaddafi closed the place, for all intents and purposes, and it became essentially impossible for the Libyans who were there to sustain academic connections and networks, and the kinds of things that academics need. You need a scholarly community, and they were either outside exiled, or they were in the country and unable to continue to communicate in that way.

So, you know, even at the end of the Gaddafi era, when the United States had renewed relations, and I went back, and I actually saw some of the same people with whom I worked, the academic community, the scholarly community, was frozen in amber. Even there was a globe in the university library, the best university in Libya, and this was, I think, 2004 or 2005, and it had a map with the Soviet Union. It was stuck, and it was heartbreaking, just heartbreaking, so Libya is not by any means the most important country in the region. But the fact that it got stuck like that -- and then, of course, when Gaddafi was overthrown, just fell into shards, which is what it is now. None of us expected that, and it's not what anyone wanted to happen.

Fred Lawrence: When you were working there as a graduate student, did you have personal friendships and relationships with folks, as well as professional academic relationships?

Lisa Anderson: Oh, absolutely. It was a wonderful time.

Fred Lawrence: So let's skip ahead a little bit. You spend time at Columbia in New York. And then at some point, you get a call. "Are you interested in being provost?" first, right? At the American University in Cairo?

Lisa Anderson: Yes.

Fred Lawrence: So tell us about that.

Lisa Anderson: This is how work-life balance works. I had resisted being a candidate for most of the year, and they finally called and said, "All right, you have to fish or cut bait. You're either going to be in or out," the same week that my younger child got his college acceptances. And all of a sudden, I could imagine. I didn't even know that was an issue to me. But I could imagine being away. And my husband says, he says that I went out to Cairo to preempt empty nest syndrome. And I don't think that's entirely fair, but it is not completely inaccurate either. And so I just thought this would be the most fabulous experience, and I became president on January 1st, 2011. Which gave me 24 days of an ordinary presidency.

Fred Lawrence: I suppose it did. Actually, that's a time I know well, and I would've had no way of knowing that that's literally the same day that I became President of Brandeis University. January 1st, 2011.

Lisa Anderson: But you didn't have an Arab Spring.

Fred Lawrence: Oh, I had an Arab Spring of my own. But let's talk about yours. So what was it like being there on that campus when Arab Spring happens, explodes?

Lisa Anderson: It was fascinating, and the entire time was really very interesting. We were, like everyone else in Egypt, completely unprepared. No one expected this to happen, but it was pretty clear that there was sort of rising unhappiness, and, you know, the youth of the country were feeling restive, if you will, and not very optimistic about their

prospects. Youth unemployment is very high in Egypt, so there were those kinds of concerns. But we really did not expect that what was supposed to be recognition of, so the 25th of January is Police Day. And it was supposed to celebrate the police, but the police in Egypt were, and are, widely reviled, because they are corrupt and often very violent. So there were these protests that were beginning to develop around Police Day, and so we knew, within a week or so, that something might happen.

Lisa Anderson: But certainly no one expected them to be as large or sustained as they were, and no one expected them to end up turning out the president of the country. And that inaugurated almost four years of considerable upheaval, as the military ruled in Mubarak's absence, and then they had presidential elections, and then you had the Muslim Brotherhood president for a year, and then he was turned out of office. And then you had another year where essentially the Supreme Court Justice was running the country. And then Sisi was formally elected, so as one of my colleagues said, "American University in Cairo is a hundred years old." I was the first, and he hoped the last, president of the University to serve under four different presidents of the Republic. So it was that kind of time.

Fred Lawrence: I want to ask you in a minute what the manifestations of all of that were like on campus. But first, how would you describe the demographics of your student body?

Lisa Anderson: So yes. The student body is about 95 percent Egyptian. The faculty is about 45 percent Egyptian, 45 percent American, and then the other 10 percent from everywhere else. And that's through a protocol with the Egyptian government that AUC operates under, that was signed by Sadat, actually, after Nassar almost nationalized the university. So for a long time, the faculty and administration has been a mix of Americans and Egyptians. But the students have always been overwhelmingly Egyptian and they are of a both economic and intellectual elite. They're an economic elite because the university charges tuition, and by Egyptian standards, charges a lot of tuition.

Fred Lawrence: So let's go onto campus now during Arab Spring. How does it feel on campus, and particularly, how does it feel for a, not newly-minted member of the faculty, because you'd been provost there, but for a newly-minted president, to be dealing with this kind of turmoil?

Lisa Anderson: Well, in some ways, it was fun, and in some ways, it was difficult. We had, for example, no campus speech policy, because in Egypt, campus speech policy was dictated from the president's office. No politics, no religion. And then, all of a sudden, all bets were off; there was no president any longer, and nobody knew what the rules were. So we had some protests during that spring, because we had a lecture hall named after Suzanne Mubarak. And the students said, "The Mubaraks are gone," so forth and so on, so they ripped off the placard that had her name on it. And I said, "Okay, I understand your objection to this, but there's a difference between speech and vandalism."

Fred Lawrence: So did they appreciate the ...

Lisa Anderson: Well, we had a whole big process by which we got a faculty student committee to get together to write a speech policy, and so forth and so on. Which turned out to be fascinating, because it was the first time anybody on that campus had thought about, "Are there limits? What are community standards? Do we want to recognize community standards? Or are we going to be American absolutists about speech?" and so forth and so on. So it was very interesting and instructive, and we ended up with a speech policy, which I'll put it this way. We basically plagiarized from Carnegie Mellon, because theirs was right online. But it was great; I mean, the debate about whether this would work for us, in Cairo, was one of the most worthwhile conversations we could've been having. Then later, we also had very big and quite worrisome protests on campus, because the National Student Movement, which is very powerful and important in Egypt -- there are wonderful videos of the then President of the National Student Union of Egypt giving Sadat a hard time in a public forum. So students are viewed as important political players.

Fred Lawrence: And this is Sadat at the height of his power?

Lisa Anderson: Exactly, when he was president. Yes, exactly. So they were giving some backtalk to the President of the Republic, which did not endear him. But that individual, that student leader, ended up being one of the candidates for president during the Arab Spring. So the student movement in Egypt is old and important. So when Mubarak had been deposed, the students at the national universities all went into protest mode, because all of the presidents of the national universities had been appointed by the president of the republic. And they didn't want that any longer; first of all, he was gone, and secondly, that's not how they wanted to operate. They and the faculty wanted to elect their presidents, which I'm not sure would be a lot better. But in any event, that's what they wanted.

Lisa Anderson: So there was protest across the whole country in universities, and our students, who are among the elite of the country, didn't want to be left behind, and didn't want to be seem not to be with the protest enthusiasm of the day. But of course, I hadn't been appointed by the president of the republic. So they, wisely - correctly, in any event - picked tuition as the issue that they were going to protest about. So they were protesting about something that was actually important on our campus, and that was tuition. They closed the campus for ten days.

Fred Lawrence: Tell us a little more about what that means. In what way did they close the campus?

Lisa Anderson: Nobody could get on or off. You know, say Loyola, at least, you can walk on from the street. But the way the new campus in Cairo is designed is that it basically has a wall around it. And they closed the gates, and nobody could go in and out, and they insisted that they would not permit the campus to reopen until we had come to terms on tuition.

Fred Lawrence: And were you on campus or off campus when this happened?

Lisa Anderson: I was off campus.

Fred Lawrence: So you were outside the gates and couldn't get in?

Lisa Anderson: Exactly. And most people were outside. They let people leave, and then they closed it and said, "You can't restart school," essentially. So the emergency management team, which had not existed before the 25th of January, and then we put it together, and then it met pretty often, actually. So we would get together every morning, trying to figure out what to do about this. Because at the beginning, we couldn't even find the students to negotiate with, because they were more about protesting than negotiating. And then we began to get worried, because the American University in Cairo is accredited in the United States, and if you lose a certain number of contact hours, it's very hard to get through the semester.

Fred Lawrence: So in addition to the philosophical challenges and the revolutionary challenges, you had the prosaic challenges of keeping your accreditation.

Lisa Anderson: Precisely. Well, and in some ways, that was sort of very useful, because it kind of was a low star. It did mean, we kept coming back to, "This is what we're about, and we don't want to lose this semester, because we're an educational establishment above all." So it kind of grounded us, but by and large, I think there was a sense that this was a revolution, and it was part of the whole national atmosphere at the time, and so forth. So the student leadership, the student union, was very much behind the strike and closing of the campus, and so forth. The student group that ended up being the go between, between the administration and our revolutionaries, was the rugby team. So the rugby team....

Fred Lawrence: We take our leaders where we find them, right?

Lisa Anderson: Exactly, and I just love the rugby team at AUC. So they had credibility with the students, they had credibility with us. They ended up being the go-betweens, and we ultimately came to terms on capping increases of tuition for a couple of years, which I thought was pretty reasonable, particularly given how high the tuition is.

Fred Lawrence: So I'm sure the rugby players had credibility on both sides. Did your credibility with the students ever get questioned because after all, you're an American, not an Egyptian?

Lisa Anderson: Never because of that. What is interesting, in a place like Egypt, so it's not simply that the government has been authoritarian. But in a sense, that is reflected in many institutions in the country, including universities and so forth. So the students are reflexively skeptical about the administration. They just think that they administration is there to tell them what to do, rather than to support them. And I didn't expect that, because I'd worked mostly in American universities, and I didn't expect to be seen as somebody who was naturally, because of my position, going to be in a combative relationship with students. And over the course of time, I think that settled a little bit. But from beginning to end, there was a sense on the part of the students that people in positions in authority could not possibly be acting in their interest.

So they were skeptical about everything; they were skeptical about this issue of tuition, they were skeptical of all sorts of things like that. That wasn't about being an American, that was about being a president, and they were skeptical of my predecessor, they were skeptical of my successor. Actually, during all of the back and forth of that period in Egypt, the American University in Cairo, the Americanness was not really an issue.

Fred Lawrence: So speaking of the Americanness and issues in the region, let's broaden the lens a little bit in your academic field of study. I know one question a lot of people must ask you is, "Why is there such a peculiar preoccupation with that region in the United States, and particularly in the United States presidential politics?" It's a big world, but presidents can make it through an entire term without whole big quarters of the planet ever being discussed, but nobody gets through a term without having to deal with the Middle East.

Lisa Anderson: Well, I think part of it is an odd mix of the kinds of interest we have in the region, and the fact that we don't have as deep and consistent interests in this part of the world as we have in East Asia or Latin America. So I often say to people, "Think about the clothes you're wearing. They will tell you what country of origin, and it's never the Middle East." So you get clothes that were manufactured in South Asia, or East Asia, and so forth and so on. Or think about where your food comes from. It comes from Mexico, it comes from Brazil -- all the soys. So most of the rest of the world, we have these intimate economic ties. There's manufacturing, there's agriculture, so forth.

In this part of the world, our ties are really very much political. They're geostrategic. There's access to oil that we worry about, there's security of Israel we worry about. Until the Soviet Union collapsed, we worried about containment of communism. So these were political relationships with regimes, not deep relationships with countries or peoples. As a result, we tend not to know very much about what's going on in the region, and to be pretty easily surprised by events in the region. Now the fact that we're surprised is an issue for the presidential politics, because no president likes to look surprised. And then all of a sudden, Saddam has invaded Kuwait, or 9/11 happens.

Fred Lawrence: Or Khomeini comes from Paris.

Lisa Anderson: Exactly, so we're always being surprised. So it becomes not an issue of national interest, because even with Iran, frankly, it was as much an embarrassment of the United States and the president to have the hostages taken, and so forth and so on, as it was that we had deep relations with Iran that we were going to be cut off from resources that we needed, and so forth, because oil from Iran was fungible for oil from other places, and so forth. But it was an embarrassment, Carter was embarrassed.

So each of these things becomes something that the president has to deal with as a political issue, not as an issue of strategy, not as an issue of national interest. So it's always urgent and rarely important. But over the course of time, you accumulate these kinds of commitments because of whatever the resolution was. And then you're

tangled in relationships with regimes, and with individuals, and so forth and so on, that are hard to get out of. But as I say, not because of the kind of interests that the United States has in most of the rest of the world. So it's an odd combination.

Fred Lawrence: So if you could give the administration, the American administration, one or two pieces of advice right now for the region, what would you advise them?

Lisa Anderson: Well, it's an interesting moment, because in a perfect world, I would say, I actually think that American businesses should be encouraged to make investments in the region. And again, I would say particularly Egypt, not only because I'm most familiar with it, but a third of the Arab world lives in Egypt. So this is a weighty, important country. And there are lots and lots of people looking for jobs. You could do job training and set up all sorts of business opportunities, and so forth, if you were willing to see this as a place that you could, you can do business there. The United States could be encouraging our own businesses to do that.

Lisa Anderson: But I think the United States foreign policy establishment is really implicitly, and perhaps should be doing this more explicitly, trying to rethink the extent to which this kind of entanglement serves the United States. So if you think it does, then you're going to have to make more of an investment. That's the challenge. And more of an investment in these kind of, in the economies of the countries, not simply in the regimes. You can invest all you want in good relations with Mubarak, and if he falls, you're over, it's over. But if you've invested in, you know, business and trade arrangements, and so forth and so on, the governments can come and go, and you still care, as we do, say, about Germany and France. Or, for that matter, Korea and Taiwan. So these are kinds of relationships that it doesn't really matter who's in charge, whereas our relations in the Middle East are entirely based on who's in charge.

Fred Lawrence: So you're back at Columbia now. I picture you in your office in Morningside Heights, and there must be pictures -- beautiful, evocative pictures of Cairo. What do you miss most about your time at American University in Cairo?

Lisa Anderson: The people I worked with. Two things I miss, one of which is I love the sunshine. I mean, keep in mind that Egypt is the gift of the Nile, and if the Nile weren't there, it would be the Sahara Desert. It's always warm and sunny, and I have to say, that was really cool.

Fred Lawrence: Manhattan is not always warm and sunny?

Lisa Anderson: I'm sorry to say. But mostly, I just loved the people I worked with, the people at the university. This is an institution full of people who are deeply committed to a liberal arts project, in a place where they have to explain it when they go home every day. And I just have enormous respect for them.

Fred Lawrence: Well, thank you for being a Visiting Scholar this year, for joining me today at Loyola. It's been a pleasure.

Lisa Anderson: Thank you very much.

Musical interlude.

Lawrence: Thanks to Loyola University for welcoming us to their campus today, and especially to Mike Puma for coordinating our visit. This episode was produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. Our field producer for today was Melissa Caplin, and the episode was mixed by Paola Mardo. Our theme song is "Back to Back" by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time!

CITATION:
Lawrence, Fred, host. "Middle East Scholar Lisa Anderson on Leading a University in Cairo During the Arab Spring." *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa*, The Phi Beta Kappa Society, May 3, 2019. www.pbk.org

Produced by