

TESTIMONY
DEPUTY SECRETARY OF STATE JAMES B STEINBERG
HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
“RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN EGYPT AND LEBANON:
IMPLICATIONS FOR BROADER US POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST”
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2011

A Region in Flux

Madam Chairman, I congratulate you on taking the gavel. Secretary Clinton and I look forward to working closely with you, Ranking Member Berman, and all of the members of this Committee to promote U.S. leadership and security in a changing world.

Last month in Doha, Secretary Clinton challenged the leaders of the Middle East to give greater voice to their people. She warned that the status quo is unsustainable. The Middle East today confronts a potent combination of demographic and technological changes, rampant unemployment, and—in too many cases—the denial of universal rights and freedoms.

In recent weeks, this dynamic has given rise to demonstrations across the region; the overthrow of a decades-old regime in Tunisia; a new cabinet in Jordan; a declaration from Yemen’s President that he will not seek additional terms in office; and of course the dramatic developments in Egypt that—along with events in Lebanon—are the focus of today’s hearing.

In such an environment, it is more important than ever that U.S. policy focus on working with both people and governments to democratize and open up political systems, economies, and societies. As the Secretary said in Munich, this is “not simply a matter of idealism. It is a strategic necessity.”

Change will emerge differently in response to different circumstances across the region, but our policies and our partnerships are guided by a few consistent principles. We stand for universal values including freedom of association, assembly, and speech. We oppose violence as a tool for political coercion—either to perpetuate the status quo or to change it. And we have spoken out on the need for meaningful change in response to the demands of the people for progress toward fair, responsive, and democratic governance.

This has been a message that U.S. administrations of both parties have been conveying to Arab leaders, publicly and privately, for many years—a message backed by programs and grants for activists and civil society organizations across the region. It hasn’t, of course, been our only message. These same administrations have also sought cooperation on crucial priorities such as countering violent extremism, curbing Iran’s nuclear ambitions, and bringing comprehensive regional peace to the Middle East. But these are not mutually exclusive or even contradictory. The events of the last few weeks have reinforced the fact that, absent freedom and democratic progress, the public support and inherent legitimacy needed to progress on other common goals cannot be sustained. The status quo is not stable, nor is it sustainable.

Therefore, changes must come. At the same time, we must be mindful of the challenges that come with transitions. They can lead to chaos and new forms of intolerance, or backslide into authoritarianism. We want to create durable democracies, which is why we are working, wherever we can, to ensure that political transitions are deliberate, inclusive, and transparent. We expect all who take part in such transitions to honor certain basic commitments, including a spirit of tolerance and compromise, respect for the rights of minorities, and a commitment to hold power through consent rather than coercion. As President Obama said in his historic 2009 Cairo address, “Without those ingredients, elections alone do not make true democracy.” At the same time, we also expect the process of reform to move forward promptly – justice and democracy deferred will be justice and dignity denied.

One constant in a changing region is our unwavering support for Israel’s security. We continue to believe that the best path to the long-term security of Israel and the stability of the region is the committed pursuit of comprehensive peace — peace through a two-state solution with the Palestinians, peace with Syria and Lebanon, and full normalization of relations with all of Israel’s neighbors. As the recent Quartet statement of the United Nations, Russia, the European Union, and the United States made clear, at a moment of upheaval across the region, serious negotiations toward peace remain essential. Where Israel has already made peace, we will work with focus and vigor to preserve and deepen it and to make clear that we count on governments that have made peace with Israel to sustain their commitments. We are committed to ensuring that political changes on Israel’s borders do not create new dangers for Israel or the region. By working for orderly transitions, we believe we can help ensure Israel’s long-term security just as we can support governments that are more responsive to their people. We will be vigilant against attempts to hijack the legitimate impetus for domestic reform to advance extremism that would set back the cause of both universal rights and regional stability.

These principles guide our approach and our policies throughout the region.

Egypt

Egypt today is undergoing a remarkable transition. And given Egypt’s leadership and influence, its three decades of peace with Israel, and our deep and longstanding partnership, the stakes are high.

All of us have been transfixed by the images from Tahrir Square of Egyptians, young and old, rich and poor, Muslim and Christian, gathering to lay claim to rights enjoyed in democratic societies around the world—rights that they are demanding, rightfully, for themselves.

As the President has said, Egypt is not going back to the way it was. We have declared publicly and privately that a peaceful, orderly, and meaningful transition must begin without delay. And it must make immediate and irreversible progress toward free and fair elections that respect the rights and reflect the will and aspirations of the Egyptian people.

We have set out key principles —publicly and privately— to ensure that the transition remains peaceful. We made clear our support for universal human rights for the Egyptian people, including freedom of expression, association, assembly, religion, and communication; freedom

of the press; and free access to information. Suppression is not going to be a solution to the challenges facing Egypt. We have condemned violence, including violence against peaceful protestors, reporters, and human rights activists and called for those who have committed abuses to be held accountable. We have urged an end to the harassment and detention of political prisoners. And we have underlined the need for Egypt's military to protect the people of Egypt, and to remain a force for calm.

Our strategic partnership with Egypt is deep and longstanding. We want to continue and strengthen our partnership with the people of Egypt to ensure a timely, broad-based, and meaningful transition to free and fair elections and durable, sustainable democracy. In that spirit, we are reaching out to a wide range of governmental and nongovernmental actors to help Egyptians turn this moment of uncertainty into a moment of opportunity. And we are urging Egypt's government, opposition, and civil society to engage in serious and inclusive negotiations to arrive at a timetable, game plan, and pathway to constitutional and political reforms.

The Egyptian government has stated its commitment to a serious dialogue and free and fair elections. But these words must be backed by action that demonstrates their seriousness. More concrete steps are needed to set the tone for a meaningful and orderly transition—including the repeal of Egypt's state of emergency and new laws to permit political parties to form and participate. We will be vigilant in ensuring that the desire for an orderly transition not be a pretext for backsliding and stalling.

Ultimately, Egypt's future must be in the hands of its people. They are the ones who will have to reach the agreements that move their country's political life forward. We will support principles, processes, and institutions—not personalities. We are hopeful that Egyptians can lay the groundwork not just to elect new leaders, but to reform laws, strengthen liberties, build institutions, and respect the rights of religious minorities and women. All must be part of a new political life and pluralistic process in Egypt.

Another vital message we are sending to all who take part in shaping Egypt's political future is the fundamental need to respect the Camp David Accords and to honor Egypt's historic peace treaty with Israel. This is critical for the region, for our partnership, and especially for Egypt which we want to continue to exhibit responsible regional leadership. The internal challenges that Egypt faces today make continued stability on its borders all the more important—and fulfillment of its international obligations—all the more important.

Egypt will have to build democratic institutions after the recent unrest—and also contend with the economic challenges that helped to cause it. And as they do, the United States will continue to extend the hand of partnership and friendship to the Egyptian people. We should act now—as we have done in the past—to support civil society, non-governmental organizations, democracy groups and economic recovery. As the transition unfolds, we will tailor support to engage and nurture it.

Finally, many Members of Congress have spoken to the Department about the welfare of citizens from your districts. I want to take a moment to acknowledge the heroic efforts of those State Department and USAID employees who are in Egypt and on our Egypt Task Force in

Washington. Our diplomats have worked around the clock even as their own families were evacuated. Sometimes we talk abstractly about the importance of investing in our diplomats and embassies. But there is nothing abstract about what these tireless men and women have done to protect and evacuate more than 2300 U.S. citizens from Egypt during the unrest. They deserve our recognition and our thanks.

Lebanon

In Lebanon, a very different situation is unfolding. Last month, Hizballah, backed by Syria, used threats of violence to undermine the government of Prime Minister Saad Hariri and ultimately force its collapse. This political intimidation runs contrary to Lebanon's sovereignty and to the rule of law. We have worked with the international community to speak with one voice as we urge the next Lebanese government to support the Special Tribunal for Lebanon; to honor its international obligations including the letter and spirit of UN Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1701; and to refrain from retribution against former or current officials.

We intend to judge the next Lebanese government by its deeds. We will be watching Prime Minister-designate Mikati to see whether he makes good on his public pledge to build a broad-based government that represents all sections of Lebanese society. His efforts to maintain stability on Lebanon's border with Israel will be another crucial factor in the evolution of the U.S.-Lebanese bilateral relationship.

The Lebanese people deserve better than a false choice between justice for the murder of their former Prime Minister and stability for their country. The truth is that lasting peace and stability depend on ending impunity for political assassinations that no country should be forced to tolerate. We will continue to support the Tribunal as it brings its work to a conclusion. And we expect Lebanon's leaders to make it clear that they seek a future free of outside influence or pressure.

As the shape of Lebanon's transition becomes clearer, we will be in a better position to discuss the future of our assistance to Lebanon. One lesson from Egypt is that strong ties with a professional military can be a stabilizing force, a source of influence, and—in Lebanon's case—a bulwark against malign outside interference. We have made significant gains in our engagement with both the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Lebanese Internal Security Forces. And we remain committed to the goals of Resolution 1701, including the establishment of the LAF as the sole armed force in Lebanon. The fact that we continue to plan for assistance through FY2012 is an incentive to the next Lebanese government to protect the LAF's independence as a national institution serving all Lebanese, but we will follow developments closely in connection with our future support. In the short term, we continue to monitor our end-use agreements to ensure that no weapons are diverted from the Lebanese Armed Forces, which continues to maintain an excellent end-use record.

Jordan and Tunisia

The need for reform extends to all countries across the region. Like many of its neighbors, our ally Jordan has experienced some peaceful demonstrations. Earlier this month, King Abdullah

appointed a new Prime Minister with a mandate to enact swift and sweeping reforms. The King has already met with Jordanian opposition leaders and instructed the incoming Prime Minister to work toward an inclusive government. We look forward to working with Jordan's new government and the Jordanian people to help them deliver reform and results.

Tunisia, where the current wave of democratic protests began, will also serve as an important test case. All of us were inspired by the courage of Tunisians determined to bring about political change. Now, the people and leaders of the region are watching closely to see how Tunisia navigates the challenging transition to democratic governance. We fully support this effort.

A credible electoral process is a vital next step in addressing grievances and bringing lasting stability to Tunisia. We are working with a range of actors across the Tunisian political spectrum and civil society to help lay the groundwork for free and fair elections, significant political and legal reform, vibrant political parties, and a free media as the country shapes and plans for a democratic future.

In cases like Tunisia's, where events are changing rapidly, we are able to respond and develop plans because we have resources available in our global democracy funds, in the Middle East Partnership Initiative, and in the Complex Crises Fund. We are evaluating the current scope of our assistance to Tunisia so that we can respond effectively to possible requests from the Tunisian government to help it follow through on its promises for political and economic reform. We will continue to consult with Congress as events in Tunisia unfold.

Conclusion

In the last month, the Middle East has experienced momentous change driven by a fundamental yearning for the same opportunities and values that have served us as a nation since our founding. We will need to provide support for democratic transitions in Egypt, Tunisia, and across the region. We must make sure that we have the tools to deliver support to civil society and democratic institutions appropriate to this new opportunity. Many of the region's leaders have promised important reforms. In many cases, we have the capacity to help them keep their commitments. And where real political change begins to take root, we must be ready to support it.

It will be up to the people of the region to choose their future. But we can—and will—partner with all who renounce violence, respect the rights of others, including minorities, and seek our help to lay the groundwork for more prosperous, democratic, and peaceful societies. Meeting these challenges demands a close and ongoing partnership with Congress as well. I thank you for inviting me here today. I look forward to your questions.