Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

The situation in the Middle East: challenges and opportunities

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“I am grateful to the Secretary General for his briefing, and it is an honour to chair this Special Session of the Security Council on the Middle East.

The United Kingdom has convened this meeting for two important reasons:

First, to call for intensified international efforts to support political and economic freedom in the Middle East; while respecting the sovereignty of Arab nations. This includes meaningful assistance to Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Libya as they strive to make a success of their transitions.

And second, to call once again for urgent, essential Security Council action to stem the bloodshed in Syria.

The Arab Spring as it has become known is already the most significant event of the early 21st century, with deep implications for international peace and security. It is therefore right that it is debated by the Security Council.

Some people regard the Arab Spring with fear and consternation.

But in Britain we view it in a strongly positive light.

It raises the prospect of the greatest enlargement of human freedom since the end of the Cold War, and of a Middle East that in twenty years’ time could be made up of open, prosperous and stable societies.

If this scenario were also to include peace between Israelis and Palestinians - underlined by the events in and around Gaza of the last few days - and an negotiated settlement of the nuclear crisis with Iran, then the case for helping it become a reality is even stronger.

But if instead we turn away from the region;

If we downgrade our expectations and allow pessimism to prevail;

If we send the signal that repression and violence will be tolerated;

Or if we allow Syria to descend into civil war or to remain convulsed by violence;

Then immense opportunities will be squandered and some of the worst fears about the region's future could be realised.

We can see today of positive developments that seemed unthinkable two years ago: such in Tunisia, the first democratically-elected parliament since the 1950s, with 24% of the seats held by women; in Libya, a new government after forty years of one-man rule; and in Morocco, free elections under a new Constitution.

Some of these countries face immense challenges and there will be setbacks as well as progress in the years ahead.

But this strengthens the case for helping Arab nations to build their institutions, open up their economies, and create strong civil society, where such assistance is requested.

Britain is doing its part in that. Our Arab Partnership Initiative is supporting projects in ten different countries. The international community can do more on an even greater scale through international financial institutions, the G8 and regional organisations. The European Union has made a bold offer of support to the region which must now be implemented in full.

We believe that as we build on these efforts, we should be guided by three clear principles:

The first is that demands for human rights and freedom are universal and will spread by themselves over time, because they are fundamental human aspirations.

This is not a new concept. It was enshrined in the preamble to the UN Charter and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the UN General Assembly 64 years ago.

It is a truth that governments ignore at their peril, and it is proven by the experience of many countries.

The Arab Spring reconfirms what history warns: that when governments respond with an iron fist to the irrepressible dreams, legitimate demands and unconquerable hopes of their citizens they are doomed to fail in the long term. Repression is a policy of failure and it cannot build stability.

All governments in the region should embrace peaceful reform and make decisive moves in the direction of greater political and economic freedom.

If not, we may see more of the violent ruptures that can follow when people demand rights that no amount of coercion will ever persuade them to abandon.

The second and fundamental principle is that we cannot dictate change from the outside, and nor would we want to.

There is no one model of democracy, and so it is for the people of each country in the region to determine their future in accordance with their different cultures, traditions and political systems.

But no government anywhere in the world can justify violence against their people or say that the fundamental democratic principle - the right of citizens to choose and to change their representatives - does not apply in their country.

In Britain we will always stand for that vital principle. And so we must also respect the choices that Arab citizens make through the ballot box.

This includes being prepared to work with new elected groups that draw their inspiration from Islam, while holding them to the same high standards of non-violence, respect for human rights and willingness to respect the outcome of future elections that are expected of others.

My third principle is that economic and political reform go hand in hand. Economic success is essential to support stability and prosperity, but equally there can be no long term stability without greater political openness.

And finally, the Arab Spring will be the work of a generation and we must show strategic patience in not turning away from the region.

But all these good intentions will count for nothing if we cannot stand by our values or meet our responsibility in the most urgent crisis today.

The situation in Syria casts a long shadow over this debate.

In the eyes of the overwhelming majority of the world, this Council has so far failed in its responsibilities towards the Syrian people.

It has failed to address the brutal oppression of peaceful protesters by the Syrian regime, and it has not yet put its weight and authority behind the efforts of the Arab League.

It is time for the Security Council to show unity and to show leadership.

It should be possible for the Council to call for an immediate end to the brutal repression and violations of human rights;

to demand an end to all violence and immediate and unhindered humanitarian access;

to call on the Syrian government to implement its own commitments to the Arab League, by stopping military action, withdrawing its forces from towns and cities, releasing all political prisoners and allowing access to the media;

to endorse the work of the Arab League and of Kofi Annan in his role as Joint Arab League and UN Envoy;

And to support UN and Arab League facilitation of a Syrian-led political transition.

I call again on the Council to adopt a resolution containing these essential elements.

Beyond this Chamber, British experts are working in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon to help document crimes against the Syrian people. I urge other nations here to join us in that effort, so that the regime knows it cannot proceed down this path with impunity.

Secretary General, not all countries here regard the Arab Spring in the same light. But we have a shared responsibility for maintaining international peace and security, and immense common interests in working together. This was the very reason the United Nations was first created, and we should act together in that spirit now, not only in stemming bloodshed in Syria but in long term support to this vital region."

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/the-situation-in-the-middle-east-challenges-and-opportunities