Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary William Hague statement on North Africa and the Middle East

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“Mr Speaker, with permission I will make a statement on Libya, North Africa and the Middle East on which I have undertaken to keep the House regularly updated. Our country has a compelling interest in seeing the nations of the wider Middle East move towards more open societies, political systems and economies.

We cannot dictate change in the region, but we can use our membership of the United Nations Security Council, NATO and the EU and our close links in the region to encourage reform, and we can stand up against repression and violence which we have seen taken to extremes in Libya and Syria.

Britain continues to play its full part in implementing the No Fly Zone over Libya and the measures called for in UN Security Council Resolutions 1970 and 1973 to protect civilians.

Our actions continue to save lives. NATO strikes have prevented Benghazi from falling, reduced pressure on Misrata, and enabled the delivery of humanitarian aid and the evacuation of thousands of wounded. Over 13,000 sorties have been carried out since 31 March, including nearly 5,000 strike sorties. In June alone 131 military facilities and 343 tanks and vehicles have been hit. I hope the House will join me in paying tribute to the men and women of our Armed Forces who are carrying out this vital work.

We can and we will sustain these operations for as long as necessary, until the regime ceases attacks on its own people and complies with the UN Resolutions. As my Rt Hon Friend the Defence Secretary has said, we have the military capability, political resolve and legal authority to see through what we have started.

Support for the regime within Libya is being eroded as we and our allies intensify the military, political and diplomatic pressure upon it. The EU sanctions on Ports in Western Libya which I announced in my last statement have now been put into effect. I welcome the decision of the International Criminal Court to issue arrest warrants for Qadhafi, his son Saif al Islam al Qadhafi and his intelligence chief Abdullah al Senussi. This confirms that there can be no future for the Qadhafi regime leading Libya, and that any of its adherents who do not want to be associated with human rights violations should abandon it, as many former ambassadors, ministers, military officials and members Qadhafi’s inner circle already have.

In addition to this pressure we are working with more than forty states and organisations to support a political transition in Libya through the Libya Contact Group. This includes the UN, the Arab League and the African Union. At the third meeting of the Contact Group in Abu Dhabi on 9th June, Egypt and South Africa were also represented for the first time as observers.

The Contact Group's work to support an inclusive political transition, as set out in the Transitional National Council's 'Road Map on Libya', is gathering pace. UN Special Envoy al-Khatib is leading political efforts. I met him last week in Luxembourg. We hope that in the coming weeks he will engage intensively with all parties.

In Abu Dhabi the Contact Group agreed to facilitate the start of an inclusive national dialogue in Libya. The NTC has begun to make contacts across Libya in support of that process. In the last week, the NTC received the first $100 million of international funding through the Temporary Financing Mechanism set up by the Contact Group, for vital fuel and salaries. I will attend the next meeting of the Contact Group in Istanbul next month, which we hope will focus on ensuring that the international community is ready to support the Libyan people in building a peaceful and stable future in post-Qadhafi Libya. It is vital that plans for post-conflict Libya are prepared and as far as possible, agreed in advance.

An International Stabilisation Response Team from the UK, US, Turkey, Italy and Denmark visited Libya between 20 May and 9 June to assess stabilisation needs. It has identified a range of areas where Libya will need immediate support, including political settlement, security and justice, basic services, economy and infrastructure. But this process should be owned by the Libyan people. The UN has confirmed the importance of early preparations for the post-conflict situation and the leading UN role in this. The FCO, DFID and MOD are coordinating closely to identify where the UK, in addition to our international partners, can provide key expertise in support of their efforts.

Members on all sides of the House will also be concerned about the grave situation in Syria which shows no sign of abating. Protests across the country are still being met by unacceptable violence from the regime, and the reports of Syrian troop movements near the Turkish border are of serious concern.

President Assad's speech on 20 June speech was disappointing in its failure to take any concrete action to stop the violence and change the situation on the ground. It did contain some proposals for reform, including plans for a National Dialogue, constitutional reform and new laws on political parties, elections and the media. To be significant such changes would need to be implemented quickly and fully. The regime needs to show that these pledges are more than tactical calculations designed to buy time and appease the demonstrators, which so far it has not done.

The holding of a public meeting of opposition figures in Damascus on 27 June, the first of its kind in a decade, was a positive step. I hope further such meetings can be held. But without an end to the violence, the release of all political prisoners including those detained in recent demonstrations, and a guarantee of the right to peaceful protest, there can be no credible attempt at National Dialogue and the opposition meeting will have been a wasted opportunity.

Last week the EU imposed further sanctions against 11 individuals and entities associated with violent repression against civilians. The draft resolution UN Security Council Resolution that Britain has circulated remains on the table. We believe that the Security Council must speak out against repression in Syria, and that President Assad must reform or step aside.

I spoke yesterday to the Turkish Foreign Minister, who briefed me on Turkey's efforts to persuade President Assad to change course and implement reform. It is important that we use all available channels to convey this message to President Assad. This week My Hon Friend the Member for Braintree travelled to Syria in a private capacity where he met President Assad. He told him that international pressure on Syria will only increase if it continues on its current path. Given that only a change of course in Syria will bring about an end to the violence we should welcome contacts that reinforce the need for urgent change.

Yesterday, my officials also made clear to the Syrian Ambassador our strong concerns about allegations that a diplomat at the Syrian Embassy has been intimidating Syrians in Britain. Any such activity would amount to a clear breach of acceptable behaviour. If such claims were substantiated, we would respond swiftly and appropriately.

Elsewhere, there have been positive developments in Jordan, where King Abdullah has pledged to promote political and economic reform. He has set out his vision to develop Jordan's democracy and engaged widely with Jordanian society. We stand ready to use the UK's bilateral Arab Partnership Fund to support this process where we can.

We also welcome the announcement by the King of Morocco of a new draft Constitution on 17 June, which includes a strengthened role for the Prime Minister and Parliament, greater Constitutional protection for human rights, and gender equality. There will be a referendum on 1 July and we look forward to Parliamentary elections scheduled for October.

I welcome the support expressed in the House on previous occasions for UK leadership in the reform of the European Neighbourhood policy and the ambitious international response to the region that we saw at the G8 Summit in Deauville. Multilateral development banks, including the World Bank, African Development Bank and the European Investment Bank, will offer to provide over $20 billion in support of reform efforts over the next two years. It is crucial that the international response to the Arab Spring remains ambitious, generous and bold, and includes the real prospect of closer association with the EU, including market access, in response to political and economic reform.

I can also report progress on the Arab Partnership since the Prime Minister's announcement of its expansion to £110 million over four years. In Tunisia we are supporting steps to improve voter education, freedom of expression and balanced reporting in the run-up to October's important Constituent Assembly elections. Last week Tunisia became the first North African state to ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, a very welcome indication of its commitment to reform. And in Egypt we are working with those running the forthcoming parliamentary elections. We remain concerned that Parliamentary elections in September may be too soon to allow a wide range of political parties to mobilise fully.

In comparison with these more encouraging developments, I am deeply concerned by the situation in Bahrain. While every government has the right and duty to maintain law and order, the suspension and investigation of political parties, the imprisonment of leading moderate politicians, the alleged mistreatment of detainees and the trial of members of the medical profession before tribunals containing a military judge were all damaging to Bahrain and steps in the wrong direction. I welcome the King's announcement of a National Dialogue from 1 July and the end of the State of National Safety. But we look to Bahrain to match such announcements with concrete actions to address the legitimate aspirations of the Bahraini people, and to leading figures on both sides in Bahrain to promote successful and peaceful dialogue.

Iran continues to connive in the suppression of legitimate protest in Syria and to suppress protests at home. I therefore welcome the European Council's decision to sanction three senior Commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. Iran has also been carrying out covert ballistic missile tests and rocket launches, including testing missiles capable of delivering a nuclear payload in contravention of UN resolution 1929, and it has announced that it intends to triple its capacity to produce 20 % enriched uranium. These are enrichment levels far greater than is needed for peaceful nuclear energy. We will maintain and continue to increase pressure on Iran to negotiate an agreement on their nuclear programme, building on the strengthening of sanctions I announced to the House earlier this month.

In Yemen, President Saleh's departure has been followed by greater calm in Sana'a. However I remain concerned about greater instability in Yemen and the possibility of economic collapse and humanitarian crisis. The Government of Yemen must confront these challenges urgently. We encourage all parties, including President Saleh, to engage in political dialogue on an orderly transition on the basis of the Gulf Co-operation Council Initiative, which remains the most credible plan. We also continue to advise against all travel to Yemen and urge all British nationals to leave the country now, whilst commercial carriers are still flying.

South Sudan's independence is now just over a week away, but it is set to take place against a backdrop of conflict and unresolved issues.

We welcome the agreement reached on Abyei, which paves the way for a swift withdrawal of Sudanese Armed Forces from Abyei and the deployment of Ethiopian peacekeeping troops under a UN mandate. The UN Security Council has moved swiftly to adopt a mandate for this new mission. This is just a first step and we call on the parties to implement their commitments.

The continued violence in Southern Kordofan is also troubling, with reports of indiscriminate aerial bombardment by the Sudanese Armed Forces, and individuals being targeted on the basis of their ethnicity or political affiliation. I call on all parties to agree an immediate cessation of hostilities, and to allow immediate access to humanitarian agencies. I welcome the news that last night a framework agreement was signed last night and hope that it will soon be followed by a ceasefire.

We continue to urge North and South to use the good offices of former President Mbeki to resolve outstanding issues under the Comprehensive Peace Agreement before 9 July. It is particularly important that they agree the sharing of oil revenue and citizenship issues, as well as their border. The AU-led negotiations, which are funded by the UK, resume in Addis Ababa on 3 July. I urge the parties to seize this opportunity to build long-term peace and stability in Sudan.

All these events in the region call for a redoubling of international efforts to support peace, stability and democracy. Nowhere is this need more pressing than in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There is no alternative to negotiations, recommenced as a matter of urgency, to address the fundamental issues at the heart of a two state solution. We call on the parties to return to the negotiating table - for no other option will bring lasting peace.

Mr Speaker, we will continue to defend human rights and support political and economic freedom throughout a region undergoing momentous change and experiencing a chain of crises, and we will continue to work closely with our allies in the interests and peace and stability for this region and across the world.”

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-william-hague-statement-on-north-africa-and-the-middle-east