Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary updates Parliament on Middle East and North Africa

2011-11-09

In a statement to Parliament on 9 November the Foreign Secretary said:

“I want to begin with the situation in Libya:

The National Transitional Council declared Libya’s liberation on 23 October after the fall of Sirte and death of Colonel Qadhafi, starting the country’s transition to democracy as set out in the Council’s Constitutional Declaration. A new interim Libyan Prime Minister Mr al-Kib has been appointed, and we expect other Ministers to be appointed soon. The formation of a new Government is due to be followed by elections within eight months for a new National Congress.

Mr Speaker, these are historic achievements. NATO operations came to an end on Monday 31 October, following the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2016 on 27 October. The whole House will join me in paying tribute to our Armed Forces whose contribution has saved many lives and helped make this transition possible.

I visited Libya on 17 October to officially reopen our Embassy and to hold talks with the Libyan authorities. We are providing communications and logistics support for Libya’s new police force and deploying a British policing adviser. We are also supporting attempts to locate missing anti-aircraft weapons and to clear mines in Misrata, and giving advice on destroying stocks of chemical weapons. We are encouraging the Libyan authorities in their efforts to reintegrate former fighters, bring together Libya’s security forces and provide employment opportunities. It is also important that the remaining ICC indictees, Saif al-Islam and Abdullah al-Senussi, be brought to justice before a court of law. We urge Libya’s neighbours to arrest and surrender any indictee on their territory.

We are determined to address legacy issues from the Qadhafi regime, including the killing of WPC Yvonne Fletcher, the Lockerbie bombing and support for IRA terrorism. The Prime Minister discussed this with Prime Minister al-Kib on 5th November and we welcome the new Libyan authorities’ willingness to work with us to try to close this chapter of tragic events.

While progress is made in Libya, in Syria the situation is deteriorating. More than 3,500 people have been killed since March according to the UN.

On 2nd November the Arab League brokered an agreement with President Assad, which we welcomed. This plan required the Syrian government to implement an immediate ceasefire and end all violence; to withdraw its military from all Syrian cities and towns; to release all prisoners and detainees; to provide access for Arab League Committees and international media; and to begin comprehensive engagement with the opposition. Implementation was to take place within two weeks.

Apart from token measures the Syrian Government has failed to implement this plan. Instead the repression has escalated and at least 60 more people have died.

The Arab League is due to meet this weekend to review the situation. We urge them to respond swiftly and decisively with diplomatic pressure to enforce this agreement, with the support of the international community. These developments to us confirm that President Assad must step aside and allow others to take forward the political transition the country desperately needs.

We will work to intensify pressure on President Assad and his regime. On 14 October we reinforced EU measures to include sanctions against the Commercial Bank of Syria, the largest in the country. These sanctions, including the embargo on imports of oil from Syria into the EU, are already restricting sources of finance to the regime. We are working with our European partners on a further round of sanctions to be applied soon if the Syrian Government does not take immediate action to end the violence.

Turning to Iran, today the International Atomic Energy Agency will deliver its report on military aspects of Iran's nuclear programme. The report lays out clearly and objectively the evidence that the Agency has uncovered of Iran's development of nuclear weapons technology. The Board of Governors of the IAEA will convene later this month to consider these grave findings. The assertions of recent years by Iran that their nuclear programme is wholly for peaceful purposes are completely discredited by this report.

Iran is ramping up its production of uranium enrichment to levels for which it has no plausible civilian use, but which could easily and quickly be converted into weapons-grade material. The uncovering of the recent plot to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador in the United States also shows Iran's apparent willingness to sponsor terrorism outside its borders.

Iran needs to change direction. We want a negotiated solution and have extended the hand of reconciliation to Iran time and time again. We are prepared to have further talks but only if Iran is prepared to engage in serious negotiations about its nuclear programme without pre-conditions. If not, we must continue to increase the pressure and we are considering with our partners a range of additional measures to that effect.

Iran's actions not only run counter to the positive change that we are seeing elsewhere in the region; they may threaten to undermine it, bringing about a nuclear arms race in the Middle

East or the risk of conflict.

Mr Speaker, the events in the Arab Spring and mounting concern over Iran's nuclear programme do not detract from the urgent need to make progress on the Middle East Peace Process.

I repeat our calls for negotiations on a two state solution without delay and without preconditions, based on the timetable set out in the Quartet Statement of 23rd September. In our view, the parameters for a Palestinian State are those affirmed by the European Union as a whole: borders based on 1967 lines with equivalent land swaps; a just, fair and realistic solution for refugees; and agreement on Jerusalem as the future capital of both states.

Israel's announcement last week that it would accelerate the construction of 2,000 settlement housing units was wrong and deeply counterproductive. This was the eighth announcement of settlement expansion in six months. We also condemn the decision to withhold tax revenues to the Palestinian Authority which was provocative and against Israel's own interests, since it has direct implications for the Palestinian Authority's ability to maintain effective security in the West Bank. We call on Israel to revoke both of these decisions.

We are also concerned about the situation in Gaza and the constant risk of an escalation in violence. We believe the Israeli restrictions harm ordinary Palestinians, inhibit economic development and strengthen rather than weaken Hamas.

It will be both right and directly in Israel's interest if she permits increased imports of building materials for UN projects and for the private sector in Gaza, allows legitimate exports to traditional markets in the West Bank and Israel, and reduces restrictions on civilian movement between Gaza and the West Bank.

On Friday the Admissions Committee of the Security Council will conclude its consideration of the Palestinian application and produce a report summarising Council members' views on whether Palestine meets the criteria for membership under the United Nations Charter.

As this could now soon be followed by a vote in the UNSC it is appropriate to inform the House of the Government's intentions.

The UK judges that the Palestinian Authority largely fulfils criteria for UN membership, including statehood as far as the reality of the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories allows, but its ability to function effectively as a State would be impeded by that situation. A negotiated end to the occupation is the best way to allow Palestinian aspirations to be met in reality and on the ground.

We will not vote against the application because of the progress the Palestinian leadership has made towards meeting the criteria.

But nor can we vote for it while our primary objective remains a return to negotiations through the Quartet process and the success of those negotiations.

For these reasons in common with France and in consultation with our European partners, the United Kingdom will abstain on any vote on full Palestinian membership of the UN.

We reserve the right to recognise a Palestinian state bilaterally at a moment of our choosing and when it can best help bring about peace. The United Kingdom will continue to be one of the principal supporters of Palestinian state building efforts, assisting them to tackle poverty, build institutions and boost their economy.

If their application to the UNSC fails, the Palestinian leadership have indicated that they may take the issue to a vote at the UN General Assembly, where different voting procedures and different considerations apply. We and the other countries of the EU will continue to emphasise that any proposition put to the General Assembly must make a return to negotiations more likely.

For Israel, the only means of averting unilateral applications to the UN is a return to negotiations. A demonstration of political will and leadership is needed from both sides to break the current impasse. This includes the Israeli government being prepared to make a more decisive offer than any they have been willing to make in the past.

Mr Speaker, the Middle East Peace Process cannot be viewed in isolation from the rest of the region. In each country there is a huge opportunity for peaceful change, the advancement of human rights and economic development. The decisions they take now will affect their future security and prosperity, and we urge all of them to take the path of reform.

This was my message on my visit to North Africa last month, when I also travelled to Morocco, Algeria and to Mauritania; making the first visit by any British Minister to that country. I welcome the fact that during my visit the Government of Mauritania announced it will re-open an Embassy in London.

In all these countries I discussed political reform and declared our willingness to support projects through our Arab Partnership Initiative. This is already providing £6.6 million this year to projects that promote freedom of speech, political participation, support the rule of law, tackle corruption and help small business and entrepreneurs. And across the region we are working with the BBC and the British Council to develop new programmes to strengthen public debate; drawing on our country’s long tradition and expertise in these areas.

Tunisia has set an example of what can be achieved peacefully. Their elections on 23 October were the first free elections of the Arab Spring and the first in that country’s history. This is a remarkable achievement and we look to those who have been elected to the Constituent Assembly to work together in forming a government.

In Egypt, we welcome the decision of the High Election Commission to allow international NGOs to monitor their Parliamentary elections on 28 November. On his visit to Egypt last month the Deputy Prime Minister emphasised the need for a clear roadmap to democracy and announced UK Arab Partnership support to assist the democratic process and economic reform.

In Bahrain, we await the report of the Independent Commission of Inquiry into the unrest in February and March, which has been deferred until 23 November. This report is a major opportunity and important test for the Bahraini Government to show they take their human rights obligations seriously and will adhere to international standards. We stand ready to help them implement recommendations from the report. In the meantime, we continue to encourage the authorities to address allegations of human rights abuses that are reportedly still occurring and remain of great concern.

In Yemen, finally, the political impasse is deepening insecurity and poverty. On 21 October we helped to secure Security Council Resolution 2014 which was adopted unanimously and signals clearly to President Saleh that the only way to meet the aspirations of the Yemeni people is to begin a transition on the basis of the Gulf Cooperation Council's initiative. We will continue to work with others to support a peaceful and orderly transition in Yemen.

Mr Speaker each country in the region has to find its own way and we will work with governments that strive to bring about greater political and economic freedom in their countries. The Government will work with international partners to maintain peace and security, promote democratic development, and uphold the interests of the United Kingdom."

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