Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

"The Arab Spring is a moment of huge opportunity to build peace, security and prosperity for the region and by extension, the world"

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I too thank the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States for their words, and I am grateful to you Mr. President for proposing this debate on peace and security in the Middle East.

Over the past 18 months, the Arab Spring, as we've come to call it, has taken a different path in each country of the region. In some countries, revolutions have been relatively swift. In Syria, as we know, horrifying violence continues to engulf the country almost a year and a half since protests began. In other countries, peaceful reform is underway.

We respect the right of each country in the region to find its own path to reform, based on their different cultures and traditions. But we will always stand up for our belief in the universality of human rights and freedom that is at the heart of democracy.

Indeed this historic change has been driven by the people of the region demanding the greater political and economic freedom that is their legitimate right.

History has shown that those governments that draw their legitimacy from the consent of their people are best placed to deliver lasting peace and security. Where the social contract between citizen and state is based on trust and accountability, societies are able to flower. Where they are based on fear, violence and the denial of rights, conflict and insecurity arise.

That is why the Arab Spring is a moment of huge opportunity to build peace, security and prosperity for the region and by extension, the world.

Alongside open, inclusive, national structures, lasting peace and security also relies upon effective international and regional institutions. That is a lesson we ourselves have learnt the hard way, reflected in the very history of how this body was created.

And over the past 18 months, the League of Arab States has shown resolve and perseverance in working to achieve regional security and stability. I warmly commend the clear leadership they have demonstrated. They were decisive in calling for a no-fly zone in Libya. They have taken a lead in responding to the Syrian crisis, including efforts to mediate

between the Syrian opposition as well as to apply political, economic and diplomatic pressure on the Syrian regime to end the violence.

The decision to appoint a Joint UN-Arab League Special Representative for Syria is a clear indication of the growing positive cooperation between the UN and the Arab League. We strongly support the work of Lakhdar Brahimi and we will do our utmost to support his efforts to resolve the crisis in Syria just as we supported his predecessor Kofi Annan.

I fully support efforts to strengthen further the relationship between the United Nations and the League of Arab States and welcome the deepening of cooperation between these two bodies.

This is important as there are urgent challenges at hand for which the UN and the League of Arab States bear a shared responsibility. As the Syrian crisis continues to deepen, the risk of broader regional instability and conflict increases.

Addressing such crises is exactly what the UN Security Council exists to do. That the Security Council has failed to act on its clear responsibilities in the case of Syria is inexcusable and ‘shocking’ as Laurent Fabius has earlier said. It is a terrible indictment of the Council that over 22,000 people have died since it first failed to agree a resolution to stem the violence. It is long past the time for the Council to use its collective weight to require the Syrian regime to end the violence and impose serious consequences if it does not.

On the Middle East Peace Process, I am also deeply concerned by developments on the ground, including continued settlement activity and I call on both sides to avoid steps that undermine the prospects for peace and to resume direct talks.

We have long been clear that a Palestinian state is a legitimate goal and the best way of achieving this is through a comprehensive agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. We want to see a solution to this conflict that gives the Palestinian people the state that they need and deserve and the Israeli people long term security and peace.

Without this, lasting peace and security in the region will remain a elusive.

It is remarkable how much has been achieved in the Middle East and North Africa since the Arab Spring began. In Libya, Egypt and Tunisia, citizens have voted in free elections for the first time in decades.

Change has been led by the people of the region, and it is not for the West to impose its vision. However, there is a crucial role for the international community to play in supporting peaceful reform. The United Kingdom is doing this through our Arab Partnership by providing diplomatic and practical support to strengthen the political and economic participation of citizens in the Middle East and North Africa.

We must act together to ensure that hard-won freedoms and rights are protected and that those still fighting for their legitimate rights receive our support, laying the foundations for lasting peace and security in the region. We must continue to work to ensure that the United Nations acts a bridge for effective international co-operation to provide this support to the region. The people of the region deserve this from us. And we must not fail them.

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