Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Ensure the hopes of the Arab Spring aren't dashed

2011-07-11

When President Obama came to the United Kingdom in May he became only the second US President to undertake a State Visit and he cemented a unique relationship. Built on shared history, values, economic and business relationships and the close personal friendships between our people it is undoubtedly special. But as Prime Minister David Cameron said it is also essential because it is “a living, working partnership”. At a time of historic change in the Middle East and North Africa, whose impact will be felt far beyond the region, this relationship is also indispensible.

As a foreign-office minister, I have traveled across the world, from Israel to the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Tunisia to Egypt, Kabul to Islamabad and from Chicago to Atlanta. A common theme during all these visits is the cooperation between U.S. and U.K. businessmen and businesswomen, military commanders, diplomats and NGOs. Nowhere has this been more important than during the Arab Spring.

Since January it has ushered in a period of great opportunity – but also great risk. It has brought hope of a better life to millions – but also been marked by violence and uncertainty.

At its core the Arab Spring is about the people of the region demanding their legitimate rights and dignity, familiar to us in the United Kingdom and the United States. It is, therefore, for the people of the region, in Tunisia, Egypt and across the Middle East to decide their own futures. These are Arab revolutions, not ours, and it is not for us to dictate the pace or nature of the change underway. But it matters to our prosperity and security and it is right that we are clear about our values and our support for reformers.

If it brings more open and democratic societies, the Arab Spring will be the greatest gain for human rights and freedom since the end of the Cold War. If it falters, it will risk dangerous instability on Europe’s doorstep, collapse back into more authoritarian regimes, conflict and terrorism.

A coordinated U.K.-U.S. response is therefore essential, and that is exactly what is happening. President Obama set out in his speech on 19 May that we should both support the changes underway, and address the economic challenges the region faces. We are doing so together. Our leaders and officials are in constant contact, we are sharing analysis and we are working together on the ground in capitals such as Tunis and Cairo.

In the United Kingdom, part of our response is the Arab Partnership initiative, a 110-million-pound commitment over four years to political and economic reform. But with the United States we also working internationally. At the G8 we delivered the “Deauville Partnership” of over $20bn for Egypt, Tunisia and others. Now we are ensuring that as the EU reforms its Neighbourhood Policy it makes an ambitious offer to reforming neighbours: a new partnership with the EU based on greater economic integration, trade and increased funding. As President Obama said, the vision of a modern and prosperous economy can create a powerful force for reform in the Middle East and North Africa. This is in our shared interest as it is true to our shared values.

Regrettably, it also the case that we must act when leaders chose repression over reform, where they brutalize their own people and where legitimate calls for reform are suppressed. We have done so in Libya, where the United Kingdom and the United States acted to prevent a massacre as Qadhafi stood at the gates of Benghazi, and where we will continue to protect the Libyan people until he goes. And we have done so in Syria where we have coordinated actions to increase the pressure on President Assad until he chooses a different path.

Finally a key lesson from the Arab Spring is that we must not be diverted from working together on the Middle East peace process. I have recently returned from my second visit to the Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories this year and it is clear to me that the uncertainty created by the Arab Spring has also made progress on the Peace Process more urgent than ever.

I am acutely aware of the tensions in the region and the United Kingdom will never underestimate the security needs of Israel. I visited Sderot and saw first-hand the challenges people face on a daily basis - potentially just 15 seconds from a rocket attack. I discussed at length our shared concerns about Iran’s nuclear program and the role it is playing in supporting the terrible crackdown in Syria. But I also witnessed the injustices faced by Palestinians in places like Nebi Saleh and the tensions caused by settlements that only sustain enmity.

It is precisely because of these things that in the midst of instability created by the Arab Spring we should continue to press both sides to return to talks on the basis of the clear parameters President Obama has endorsed, which the United Kingdom also has been advocating. This is the only way to deliver a sustainable peace with a sovereign, viable and contiguous Palestinian state living in peace alongside a secure Israel and their other neighbors in the region.

There are risks ahead for the countries of the Middle East. Change brings the risk of instability and there are some who will seek any opportunity to create chaos. But this is not the lesson we should draw from the past six months. This is moment of hope and together we must work to ensure that it is not dashed.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ensure-the-hopes-of-the-arab-spring-arent-dashed