Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

"Our support and dedication to the people of the Middle East must be consistent and unwavering"

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It is a great pleasure to be with you today. A deep consciousness of the past, and foresight in looking to the future, are both essential requirements in foreign policy. Many historians and academics do invaluable work to ensure that a historical perspective informs much of what we do in the Foreign Office, and I look forward to benefiting from your insights today.

This year’s conference focuses on the Forms and Causes of Change in the Middle East. In previous panels you have discussed the impact of social media and the role of women in the revolutions in the Middle East. Two weeks ago I appeared on a panel in New York with two formidable women activists from Egypt and Libya, who have played leading roles in their country’s revolutions. I pay tribute to the countless women who have been at the forefront of change in the Middle East, and whose rights must be upheld in the future of all these countries.

In my remarks I will address the need for a long term, patient international approach by the international community in response to the changes sweeping the Middle East. Fifteen months after the Arab Spring began, the need for such an approach is clearer than ever.

Our Government regards the Arab Spring as the most important event of the 21st century so far, with implications that will run for many years, and we view it in a strongly positive light.

Despite the challenges that it has brought, the suffering being experienced by the people of Syria today and the economic and social problems that many of these countries are now grappling with, the Arab Spring holds the greatest prospect for the enlargement of human freedom and dignity since the end of the Cold War. The Assad regime’s acceptance of joint United Nations and Arab League Special Envoy Kofi Annan’s six point plan would represent a significant first step towards bringing an end to the violence and the bloodshed, but only if it is genuinely and seriously meant. This has not been the case with previous commitments the regime has made. The key will be concrete implementation that brings a cessation of all hostilities and leads to a genuine political transition accompanied by freedom of access for humanitarian assistance and the media, and the release of political prisoners. We will continue to judge the Syrian regime by its practical actions not by its often empty words.

The situation in Syria is much more complex than in Libya where the UN Security Council resolution was the correct approach and saved thousands of lives. The events in Benghazi inspired those who sought freedom throughout the region but without the support of the international community that may not have been possible.

Egypt and Tunisia have held their first genuine elections in decades; Libya has a new government after more than forty years of dictatorship and in Morocco, a new constitution has for the first time seen a prime minister from the party winning the most votes.

The international community's response to the Arab Spring must reflect the scale and enormity of these changes and of the challenges that these countries now face. If instead of this long term response we were to turn away from the region; if we were to downgrade our expectations and allow pessimism to prevail; if we and other nations send the signal that repression and violence will be tolerated, then these immense opportunities could well be squandered. There is a very real danger that if we do not show our support and provide impetus to transitioning governments then we could see a collapse back into more authoritarian regimes, conflict and increased terrorism in North Africa on Europe's doorstep.

Conversely it is firmly in the national interest of the United Kingdom that the countries of the Middle East and North Africa become more stable, open and prosperous over time; that they are fully integrated into the international community and global markets, and that they are able to contain security threats while meeting the legitimate aspirations of their people.

Our Government's approach to the Arab Spring is guided by three clear principles:

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

In the British Government we know that these are not our revolutions, and that we cannot determine the future of these countries but we can, of course, help bring diplomatic pressure and support to them.

Across the region, citizens have demanded their legitimate political and economic rights. In some, the only way to do this has been through brave protests. In others, governments have initiated reform processes. All the countries of the region are very different and the change that they achieve will be as unique as they are.

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

In recent elections in Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt, political parties inspired by Islam have done very well at the ballot box. Some commentators here in the West have voiced their

concern at what this means for the development of democracy and respect for human rights in the region. We do not underestimate the challenges and stresses this may introduce, or the concerns felt by many people in these countries themselves.

The Middle East is not the first and will not be the last region in the world where parties inspired by faith play a role in government and political life. What matters is whether respect for the rights of all groups is upheld. We will continue to urge all governments in the region to ensure respect for universal human rights in their constitutions and societies.

We support and respect the choices made by the people of the region through their vote. We engage with all political groups, including those inspired by Islam that reject violence, accept democratic principles and abide by existing international agreements.

We will judge them on their actions, including human rights, and the true measure of the strides made by those countries who have embraced democracy will be whether governments are prepared to surrender power if they are rejected at the ballot box. This is the ultimate form of accountability.

The second principle is that demands for human rights and freedom are universal and will spread by themselves over time. Demands for open government, action against corruption and greater political participation will spread by more widely - not because Western nations are advocating them, but because they are the natural aspirations of all people everywhere.

These are basic rights, enshrined in international law that we, in this country, take for granted and it is a truth that governments ignore at their peril.

Respect for human rights and dignity, including freedom of expression and equality of women, are universal values that must underline all political systems - there are no justified exceptions.

The Arab Spring simply reconfirms what history warns: that when governments respond with oppression and violence to the legitimate demands and hopes of their citizens they are doomed to fail in the long term. All governments in the region should embrace peaceful reform and make decisive moves in the direction of greater political and economic freedom.

The third principle is that economic success 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. The real economic challenges remain immense. Whilst people in the region want to see a move towards more democratic regime, they also want to see tangible improvements in their everyday lives whether it is jobs or education or a better way of life.

Whilst some startling change has been brought about in a relatively short space of time it has also led to sky-high expectations amongst the populace. Developing the strong institutions and liberal markets necessary to change the way that people live will take time and there may not be the rapid pace of change that people, having paid a high price for their revolutions, expect. This is why, through the Economic Facility of our Arab Partnership Initiative, we are already funding £10 million worth of projects in ten countries across the region to support the building blocks of more open, accountable and prosperous societies. This includes projects supporting media freedom, voter education, transparency in government institutions and job creation.

We will work patiently on the basis of these three principles over the years ahead. As a Government our responsibility is to pursue policies that support these goals over the long term. We are working to galvanise other nations to take a similar approach, including through the European Union, the G8, and regional groups such as the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League. The Gulf Cooperation Council has been at the forefront of leading agreement on Yemen's political transition. The Arab League led the call to protect citizens in Libya and is a driving force in the international community's response to events in Syria. Indeed, it is one of the hallmarks of our government that we are working with countries in the region, not seeking to impose solutions from the outside.

Alongside these new opportunities, we must also address long-standing challenges in the region.

We are firmly of the view that change in the region has made progress on the Middle East peace process ever more urgent.

With the help of the UK and others in the international donor community the Palestinian Authority under the stewardship of Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and President Abbas, has made significant progress in the last few years in building the institutions of a capable and effective state. It is now vital that this is matched by progress on the political track. A negotiated end to the occupation is the best way to allow Palestinian aspirations to be met in reality, on the ground.

Israel and the Palestinian Authority must take the opportunity offered by the recent Jordanian initiative and show the political leadership and courage needed to break the current impasse and make progress towards a negotiated two-state solution.

Today is the 10th anniversary of the Arab Peace Initiative, a poignant reminder that a comprehensive peace agreement is possible. Without such an agreement the long-term peace and security of the region remains in doubt.

In order to rise to the challenge of supporting the people of the region it is of the utmost importance that we make sure we have the best possible platform from which to launch this

support, including a world-leading Diplomatic Service.

During the opening events of the Arab Spring the Foreign Office was said to be the busiest it has been since the Second World War. In the first two weeks of February last year, seven million emails passed through the Foreign Office computer system; at times up to ten times the normal volume. Between January and April last year we helped evacuate 6,000 British nationals from instability and violence in the Middle East, and more than 570 extra staff volunteered to join large consular and political crisis teams that worked day and night in the FCO.

In order to meet that sort of strenuous demand we have launched the biggest drive to enhance the cutting-edge abilities and diplomatic skills of the Foreign Office that the Department has ever seen; skills in negotiation, analysis, difficult languages, economics and policy making.

This new Diplomatic Excellence Initiative covers every aspect of the work of the FCO. After years in which the level of ambition of Ministers has been that government departments are simply fit for purpose, in the Foreign Office we have set ourselves the goal of excellence in every crucial area of our work. I am pleased that through the FCO's Research Analysts we are represented on the BRISMES Council and that more than ever our Diplomats are turning to outside expertise and challenge to inform policy making.

Diplomatic Excellence means that the Foreign Office will be equipped to have a greater impact in Government as well as overseas. Our National Security Council ensures that the whole of British Government now works together to support our country's objectives in foreign policy, and Diplomatic Excellence means that the best possible ideas and analysis will flow from the FCO into the NSC.

After Afghanistan, the situation in the Middle East is my top priority and that of my ministerial team.

We know this will take time. The Arab Spring is a process and not an event. Successful transitions of this kind can take a decade or more. People mark the end of Communism and the closing stages of the Cold War with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. In fact, Polish worker unions turned on their totalitarian regime as early as 1980 and Gorbachov's policy initiatives of perestroika and glasnost were formed in the middle of the decade.

In the same way the Arab Spring was always going to be a long process rather than an instant fix. The people in the region must have patience, but the international community must have patience too. Our support and dedication to the people of the Middle East must be consistent and unwavering.

I have been inspired by the strength and bravery of activists, lawyers, bloggers, journalists, and indeed citizens from every call of life, who have led change across the region over the past fifteen months. Their enthusiasm and dynamism must be met by our own commitment and resolve to stay the course and ensure that the change is not a fleeting one.

So we will keep faith with the people of the Middle East and help them to fulfil their aspirations for a better future.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/our-support-and-dedication-to-the-people-of-the-middle-east-must-be-consistent-and-unwavering