

Recent Developments in Egypt and Lebanon: Implications for Broader U.S Policy in the Middle East

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Testimony

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DEPUTY SECRETARY STEINBERG: Thank you, Madam Chairman. And let me begin on behalf of Secretary Clinton to congratulate you on taking the gavel here and to express how much we look forward to working with you and Ranking Member Berman, and all of the members of the Committee, and to express appreciation for holding this timely hearing.

Last month in Doha, Secretary Clinton challenged the leaders of the Middle East to give greater voice to their people. As the region confronts a potent combination of demographic and technological changes, rampant unemployment, and in too many cases, the denial of universal rights and freedoms, she warned the status quo is unsustainable. And in recent weeks, this dynamic has given rise to demonstrations across the region and changes in Tunisia, Jordan, and Yemen, and of course, sparked the dramatic developments in Egypt that, along with the events in Lebanon, are the focus of today's hearing.

In such an environment, it's more important than ever that America works both with the people and the governments to democratize and open up political systems, economies, and societies. As the Secretary said just a few days ago in Munich, this is — in her words — “not simply a matter of idealism. It is a strategic necessity.”

Change will emerge differently in response to different circumstances across the region, but our policies and our partnerships are guided by a few consistent principles. We stand for universal values including freedom of association, assembly, and speech. We oppose violence as a tool for political coercion. And we have spoken out on the need for meaningful change in response to the demands of the people.

American administrations of both parties have been conveying this message to Arab leaders, publicly and privately for many years, and have also sought cooperation on crucial priorities such as counter terrorism, Iran's nuclear program, and the peace process. But these are not mutually exclusive or even contradictory. Recent events have reinforced the fact that absent freedom and democratic progress, the public support needed to sustain progress on common goals cannot be achieved.

Changes must come. But we must be mindful that transitions can lead to chaos and new forms of intolerance or backslide into authoritarianism. We are working wherever we can to ensure that political transitions are deliberate, inclusive and transparent. And we expect all who take part to honor certain basic commitments because, as President Obama said in his Cairo speech, “elections alone do not make true democracy.”

One constant in a changing region is our unwavering support for Israel's security. We continue to believe that the best path to long-term security for Israel and the region is the committed pursuit of comprehensive peace. By working for orderly transitions, we believe we can help ensure Israel's long-term security, and we will be vigilant against attempts to hijack the legitimate impetus for domestic reform to advance extremism. Egypt today is undergoing a remarkable transition. And given Egypt's leadership and influence, its peace with Israel, and our longstanding partnership, the stakes are high.

We've all been transfixed by the heroic images from Tahrir Square of young and old, rich and poor, Muslim and Christian, gathering to lay claim to universal rights enjoyed in democratic societies around the world. And as the President has said, Egypt is not going back to the way it was. We have declared publicly and privately that a peaceful, orderly, and prompt transition must begin without delay. And it must make immediate irreversible progress towards free and fair elections.

We have set out key principles to ensure that the transition remains peaceful. We have made, and will continue to make, clear our support for human rights, including expression, association and assembly, freedom of the press. We have

condemned violence against peaceful protestors, reporters, and human rights activists. And we've underlined the need for Egypt's military to remain a force for stability.

We're urging Egypt's government and opposition to engage in serious, inclusive negotiations to arrive at a timetable, game plan, and path to constitutional and political reforms. And as they do, we will support principles, processes and institutions – not personalities. The desire for an orderly transition may not be a pretext for backsliding and stalling.

Another vital message we are sending to all who take part in Egypt's political future is the fundamental need to honor Egypt's historic peace treaty with Israel. As Egypt builds democratic institutions after the recent unrest – and also contends with the economic challenges that helped to cause it – we will continue to extend the hand of partnership and friendship to the Egyptian people. And we will act now, as we have done in the past, to support civil society, nongovernmental organizations, democracy groups and economic recovery. As the transition unfolds, we will tailor our support to engage and nurture it.

In Lebanon, a very different situation is unfolding. Last month, Hezbollah, backed by Syria, used threats of violence to undermine the collapse of the Lebanese Government. We've worked with the international community with one voice to urge the next Lebanese Government to support the Special Tribunal, to honor its international obligations, and to refrain from retribution against former officials.

We intend to judge the next Lebanese Government by its deeds, mindful of the circumstances that brought it about. We will be watching Prime Minister Mikati to see whether he makes good on his public pledge to build a broad-based government that represents all sections of Lebanese society. The Lebanese people deserve better than a false choice between justice for the murder of their prime minister and stability for their country.

If I could just conclude, Madam Chairman, by observing, without commenting specifically on the recent reports that you've referenced, that what is critical as we see this unfolding dynamic is that we remain consistent in our principles and the values and interests that we bring forward, while remaining nimble to adapt to emerging circumstances. It's a little bit like having a good game plan for the game, but also knowing when to call an audible. And I think that's what we're seeing as we go forward here – consistent approach that identifies U.S. interests and values, but adapts to the circumstances and preserves our long-term interest.

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