

Egypt, Lebanon, and U.S. Policy in the Middle East

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Madam Chairman and Members of the Committee,

It is a privilege and an honor to testify at this first Foreign Affairs Committee hearing of the new Congress. It is a pleasure to return to this room, where I first testified to this Committee thirty years ago when Clement Zablocki served as chairman.

There’s enough ground to cover today for a dozen hearings but I will try to be brief—and make six points about recent developments and U.S. policy. I ask that my full statement be printed in the record.

First: The uprisings we have seen in Tunisia and Egypt are exciting proof that the thirst for freedom is indeed universal. The Middle East has lagged behind the rest of the world in moving toward democracy. In a famous analysis in 2002, the Arab Human Development Report (written entirely by Arab experts) noted that “There is a substantial lag between Arab countries and other regions in terms of participatory governance. The wave of democracy that transformed governance in most of Latin America and East Asia in the 1980s and Eastern Europe and much of Central Asia in the late 1980s and early 1990s has barely reached the Arab States. This freedom deficit undermines human development and is one of the most painful manifestations of lagging political development.”

President Bush was right when he adopted a Freedom Agenda for the Middle East. In 2003 he asked, "Are the peoples of the Middle East somehow beyond the reach of liberty? Are millions of men and women and children condemned by history or culture to live in despotism? Are they alone never to know freedom and never even to have a choice in the matter?" And he gave the answer: "Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe - because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty." As we have seen, neither President Ben Ali nor President Mubarak could build stability through despotism. Even now, we hear many arguments that what we should be pursuing in Egypt and throughout the Middle East is stability. But as President Bush said in 2007, "The problem is that pursuing stability at the expense of liberty does not lead to peace -- it leads to September the 11th, 2001. The policy of tolerating tyranny is a moral and strategic failure. It is a mistake the world must not repeat in the 21st century."

And in fact Hosnia Mubarak will leave behind a Muslim Brotherhood that is stronger than ever because he viciously repressed moderates and centrists in his effort to stay in power. The Brotherhood thrived underground and in the mosques, while a moderate who had the audacity to run against President Mubarak in 2005, Ayman Nour, was then imprisoned for four years. This suggests that Egypt's forthcoming transition to democracy will be extremely difficult and may falter, because the Mubarak regime did literally nothing in 30 years to prepare Egypt for it. The Administration was warned about all of this a year ago, and told that if Mubarak stole the November 2010 parliamentary elections and tried to install his son as his successor, Egypt was in for real turbulence. He did both—and now Egypt is reaping the whirlwind. Egyptians were not going to accept sixty years of Mubaraks, two consecutive Presidents for Life, and a continuation of the State of Emergency for another three decades. Unfortunately that advice to the Administration was not heeded—or not well enough anyway; the Administration was largely passive and hardly reacted when Mubarak stole yet another election last Fall.

The key point is that a policy of supporting freedom is our best policy in the Middle East as it is in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and everywhere else. Dictators, presidents for life, stolen elections, and a government-controlled press are all a formula for instability; democracy is the path to real stability and supporting the expansion of democracy should be our nation's policy.

Second: American policy in the region should accordingly favor democracies and countries that are moving toward reform. That means one building block for us should be our alliance with Israel, the region's only established democracy. The Israelis are very much on edge now, watching Hizballah grow stronger in Lebanon and wondering what Egypt's future policies will be like. Now is not the time for policies that make impossible demands on Israel or that unsettle its politics further. Instead we should try to close the gaps between the United States and Israel that have opened in the last two years, and rebuild our relations. Favoring democracies and those on the road to reform mean we should also value and enhance our relations with countries such as Jordan and Morocco, where reform efforts are under way. And it means that warming up to Syria sends exactly the wrong message—that we don't care about human rights and democracy, and that we don't even care when a country follows policies of deep hostility to the United States. That the United States sent an ambassador to Syria at exactly the moment when Hizballah was taking over the government of Lebanon made us look weak and even foolish.

For we must actively press for democracy not only in Tunisia and Egypt, but in Iran and Syria as well. Democracy promotion cannot be a policy applied to American allies while America's enemies are forgotten. The people of Iran have made it clear that they abhor the clerical tyranny that rules their country and would like nothing more than the freedoms being won in Tunisia and Egypt. We should be relentless in denouncing the massive human rights violations in Syria and Iran: the abuse of political prisoners, the lack of freedom of thought, assembly, speech, and press, and the phony elections. The sooner the tide of democracy reaches those shores the better off and safer we in the United States will be.

Third: the events in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Algeria, and several other Middle Eastern states should persuade us once and for all that the linkage argument—that every problem in the region is really tied to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—is false. None of those events had anything to do with Israel and the Palestinians.

Fourth: US strategy in the region should use our assistance programs, economic and military, to help those building democratic systems and respecting human rights. Too often there's a disconnect; we make speeches about human rights but we wink at violations. This is not to say we should insult friendly rulers, or break alliances, but we should be much clearer about our values and our hopes—about which side we are on in the struggle for change and reform. The Congress and several Administrations debated for years cutting back aid to Egypt to show our deep displeasure with human rights violations there, but we did not do it. That was a mistake. We should make it clear to Egypt's military right now that the billion dollars a year they get is not owed to them; they have no right to it because of what Anwar Sadat did decades ago. Their conduct must determine how much aid they get—and what kind. I am always reminded of a question the late Tom Lantos once put to me: do you think Egypt needs more tanks, or more schools? If the Egyptian military blocks reform and democracy in Egypt, those aid dollars can be far better spent in countries where the military is supporting progress instead of preventing it.

Fifth: The question of assistance applies as well to Lebanon, and my fifth point is that despite the drama in Tunisia and Egypt events in Lebanon compel our attention. For the actions taken by Hizballah this year constitute a menace to Lebanon and to American interests there and throughout the region. Hizballah has moved from seeking a minority role in the government after the 2005 elections; to using brute force in May 2008 to take the streets of Beirut and threaten all those who opposed its terrorist policies; to seeking a majority in the cabinet now, through alliances that it has created again through brute force. Hizballah wishes to rule Lebanon—behind a Sunni face to be sure, for the constitution of that country requires a Sunni prime minister. But no one will be in any doubt who really holds power.

What then should be our policy toward Lebanon? We should continue to tell the truth about what is happening, and warn against the ways in which Hizballah in alliance with Syria and Iran is taking over that country—against the wishes of the vast majority of its citizens. Our own relations with Lebanon henceforth should depend on the conduct of the new government. Does it respect human rights and civil liberties? Does it comply with UN Security Council resolutions 1559 and 1701, which require disarmament of all militias and control of the Syrian border, or does it wink at further armament of Hizballah by Iran and Syria? Does it support the Special Tribunal for Lebanon or seek to subvert it? We should be making it very clear right now that our relationship with the next government of Lebanon will depend on the answers. We should not be using our aid programs to make life easier for Hizballah by subsidizing the economy of Lebanon if Lebanon is failing all these tests. And if Prime Minister Mikati fails all those tests and governs on behalf of Hizballah, I hope we will not welcome him in Washington.

What about assistance to the Lebanese army? I was serving in the Bush Administration when the March 14 movement won the 2005 election and took over the government, and the United States began a significant aid program for the Lebanese Armed Forces or LAF. Our hope was that we would strengthen the LAF as an alternative force to Hizballah, one that could limit Hizballah's power. Sadly this has not proved to be the case at all. The LAF did not act in May 2008 when Hizballah took over the streets of Beirut, nor has it ever interfered with Iran's arms supplies to Hizballah across the Syrian-Lebanese border. On the other hand, it has acted against Al Qaida affiliates in Lebanon and maintained, in some cases, close contact with American officials.

Before you allow any further aid to the LAF, I believe this Committee should ask the new government of Lebanon and the LAF leadership to specify what the mission of the LAF will be. If they are serious about counter-terrorist activities or guarding the border, we should be willing to help—but only with clear guidelines that allow you see if goals are being met or even seriously attempted. If the LAF is acting seriously to protect Lebanon's people and its sovereignty, they will deserve our aid. But we should make it very clear now that if it allows more weapons to cross into Lebanon from Syria, if it refuses to defend the people of Lebanon from Hizballah, if it winks at Hizballah arms deliveries and depots in southern Lebanon, if it promotes Hizballah agents and loyalists to key posts, the reaction will be swift: Our aid will stop.

Where I come out, then, is to suggest a healthy IMET program that maintains contacts with LAF officers, and careful and conditional targeting of aid. The program of the last few years was based on false assumptions about the LAF and should undergo a thorough review and a reduction in size. Making the assistance conditional will help patriotic Lebanese resist Hizballah pressures and will strengthen those in the LAF who wish it to be a force serving Lebanon rather than covering up for Hizballah. But if these tests cannot be met, aid to the LAF cannot be justified.

Sixth: My sixth and final point returns to the first, about supporting democracy. Are we doing all we can? I urge the Committee to take a broad look. Look at our broadcasting efforts through VOA, RFE/RL, and the radios; is the Broadcasting Board of Governors functioning properly? Look at our aid programs, those of USAID and State, and agencies like the National Endowment for Democracy and Republican and Democratic institutes. How is democracy promotion faring? Look at the way we are training our foreign service officers, for example, to meet the challenges we see before us in the Middle East. Does the State Department value and reward those officers who are most effective not at smooth relations with hostile regimes but instead at warm relations with democratic dissidents? Does the Foreign Service Institute teach new recruits how to support those building democracy? Do AID mission directors realize that the smooth relations they often prefer—so that they can pursue their health or education programs—may make us complicit with repressive regimes that most Americans abhor? Is the State Department's Human Rights Defenders Fund working, and is it funded? Have our ambassadors been instructed to follow in this decade what President Bush ordered them to do in 2007: "Seek out and meet with activists for democracy. Seek out those who demand human rights."

Madam Chairman, thank you for beginning your tenure here with this hearing. The Middle East is changing before our eyes from a place of seemingly unending stasis and repression into an unpredictable crossroads where popular dissent, demonstrations, and demands clash with regimes unaccustomed to sharing power with the people. The United States cannot determine the outcome of these developments, but in my view

we should welcome the demands that this region's "freedom deficit," along with its economic and social deficits, must now be addressed by those who govern there. As Americans we must always find attractive the demand that governments must rule for the people, and that tyranny must end. There's danger ahead to be sure, but the cause of freedom compels our support.