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Evolving U.S. Reaction to the Protests in Tunisia and Egypt

„And tonight, let us be clear: the United States of America stands with the people of Tunisia, and supports the democratic aspirations of all people.“ (President Obama, State of the Union Address, January 25th, 2011)

One day after Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton warned Arab states that they risked “sinking into the sand” if they did not clean up corruption and quicken their glacial pace of political and economic reform, one of the Arab world’s long-reigning leaders proved those statements correct. With Tunisia’s President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali having fled Tunisia, the North African country he ruled in autocratic fashion for 23 years, chased away by a month of street protests that started in provincial cities but engulfed the capital, the United States has begun voicing cautious support for the Tunisian “Jasmine Revolution”.

Secretary Clinton’s comments reflected the growing frustration at the slow pace of change in the region since President Obama delivered his speech to the Arab and Muslim world in 2009. In the speech, President Obama emphasized the important role that democratic reform and expanding economic opportunity would have to play in building a stable and prosperous region.

Secretary Clinton’s speech also echoed the tough views of U.S. officials who believe that while some progress is being made in certain Arab countries, for example in expanding civil society, but democratic reforms and anticorruption steps have been lagging and possibly fomenting a wave of instability in the region. Though Tunisia is one of the most repressive regimes in the region, it is a U.S. partner against terrorism and Tunis is home to a regional office for the State Department’s democratic reform efforts.

Speaking recently from the State Department, Secretary Clinton stated: “I have spoken to the (Tunisian) foreign minister and to the interim prime minister, the prime minister as recently as this weekend. I’m encouraged by the direction that they are setting toward inclusive elections that will be held as soon as practicable. But there’s a long way to go. But, there’s no experience. There’s no institutional muscle memory about how you do this. And, the United States, European Union, United Nations, and other organizations around the world that want to see this transition successful and leading to a democratic vibrant outcome are offering whatever help we can. In fact, Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman is in Tunisia right now meeting with a full cross section of Tunisians to hear from them firsthand how they want to see this process unfold,” Secretary Clinton remarked at the State Department on Wednesday, January 26th.

Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman has been sent to Tunisia to underscore U.S. support for efforts there to transition from authoritarian rule to democracy, and is offering the Tunisian authorities assistance in organizing promised elec-

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tions.¹ The dispatch of Assistant Secretary Feltman underscores U.S. interests in seeing a peaceful and democratic outcome to the political upheaval.

State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley stated that the assistant secretary will seek a "first hand view" of the situation and sound out the new authorities on how the U.S. can assist in building a stable democracy. "We support the transition that is underway, and we hope that this transition will be peaceful. We understand that Tunisian civil society has questions about the nature of the government. Clearly after decades of mistrust, there are questions that the people continue to raise. The government is trying to be responsive. We know this is hard. And we know that the government will at times have missteps along the way," said Mr. Crowley.

While Mr. Crowley has said that U.S. officials are encouraged by steps the interim government has taken to begin dialogue with civil society groups, release political prisoner and ease media abuse and restrictions, he underlines the point that there is still much to be done. Mr. Crowley stated that part of Assistant Secretary Feltman's mission will be to evaluate how the U.S. can support the electoral process in Tunisia, perhaps through technical assistance by U.S. non-governmental groups that have been active in democratization efforts elsewhere.

President Obama has hailed the "courage and dignity of the Tunisian people" and said that the United States joined the rest of the world in "bearing witness to this brave and determined struggle." The President called on the interim Tunisian government to "hold free and fair elections in the near future that reflect the true will and aspirations of the Tunisian people and give life to the principle of democracy in its own way, grounded in the tradition of its own people."

During the recent State of the Union, President Obama reflected on the protests that were culminating in Tunisia and just starting in Egypt, and stated that: "Recent events have shown us that what sets us apart must not just be our power – it must be the purpose behind it. In South Sudan – with our assistance – the people were finally able to vote for independence after years of war. Thousands lined up before dawn. People danced in the streets. One man who lost four of his brothers at war summed up the scene around him: 'This was a battlefield for most of my life. Now we want to be free.' We saw that same desire to be free in Tunisia, where the will of the people proved more powerful than the writ of a dictator.

And tonight, let us be clear: the United States of America stands with the people of Tunisia, and supports the democratic aspirations of all people."²

Just as in Tunisia, Egypt has also been engulfed by the spread of massive protests. Tens of thousands of anti-government protesters have clashed with police in Cairo and other cities in the largest demonstrations in Egypt in a generation, with demonstrators wanting an end to President Mubarak's nearly 30 years of power.

While the situations in Tunisia and Egypt are distinct, they share some factors, like a population frustrated by a lack of political participation, along with high unemployment and a large, frustrated youth population. Egypt's trade minister on Tuesday insisted that the "Tunisian scenario" could not play out in Egypt, saying conditions are different and that Egypt was committed to maintaining food subsidies to keep prices low.

¹ <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2011/01/mil-110124-voa09.htm>

² <http://www.3news.co.nz/State-of-the-Union-address-Full-text-video/tabid/417/articleID/195978/Default.aspx>

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Dr. Achy of the Carnegie Middle East Center acknowledged that some of the factors increasing pressure on the Tunisian population are not replicated in Egypt: Tunisia's population has a higher level of education than Egypt's, particularly among the unemployed, he says, while Tunisia also has much tighter regulation of the informal sector.³ Tunisia's population is also more urbanized than Egypt's, with more people living in midsized cities – and thus having higher aspirations for their lives. Yet Egypt does have a huge youth population: 60 percent of Egyptians are under 30. The official unemployment rate in Egypt is about 9 percent (though the actual rate is likely higher), about 90 percent of whom are younger than 30. Youth are growing restless under the rule of an aging President Mubarak, who has increasingly clamped down on dissent in the past year.

Secretary Clinton has stated that the U.S. believed that the government of Egypt was stable and looking for ways to meet the Egyptian people's aspirations. "With respect to Egypt, which like many countries in the region has been experiencing demonstrations, we know that they've occurred not only in Cairo but around the country, and we're monitoring that very closely. We support the fundamental right of expression and assembly for all people, and we urge that all parties exercise restraint and refrain from violence."

Critics argue that this is more of the same, saying Washington is again giving lip service to freedom, democracy and justice. "This is Egyptians people chance to finally show the world that what we are calling is for real, and for Washington and Clinton to squirm away from real support, is unjust and frustrating," said one demonstrator. The demonstrator remembered when President Obama spoke out in favor of Iranian activists, "but this time around, in Tunisia and Egypt, there is little overt support for the anti-government protests. Our leaders are horrible, just as bad as Iran, but they are liked by Washington, so it is us who suffer twice, when we go to the streets and then when we try to have a voice internationally."⁴

Others say it is a fine line the United States government must take in order to not show overt support for the demonstrators, while maintaining channels with the Egyptian government.

Secretary Clinton also mentioned that the wide-spread government protest over poverty and government repression in Egypt represented an opportunity for President Mubarak to implement political, economic and social reforms to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people. In a blunt manner, Secretary Clinton said that the Mubarak government should not prevent peaceful protests or block social networking sites such as twitter or Facebook, which has helped Egyptian's spread news about the unrest and protests.

However, security forces have continued to confront protesters and Facebook and Twitter are still reporting disturbances to their services in Egypt.

In response, the United States urged Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to make political reforms in the face of peaceful protesters demanding his ouster. Secretary Clinton delivered the stronger message at a recent news conference with the foreign minister of Jordan, and suggested Egypt's government had to act now if it wanted to avert a similar outcome and urging it not to crack down on peaceful protests or disrupt the social networking sites that help organize and accelerate them. "We believe strongly that the Egyptian government has

³ http://news.yahoo.com/s/csm/20110112/wl_csm/355948

⁴ <http://bikyamasr.com/wordpress/?p=24670>

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an important opportunity at this moment in time to implement political, economic and social reforms to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people," Secretary Clinton said in the statement.

The general concern is that a wave of upheaval could uproot valuable allies like Egypt, who are considered a linchpin in the area as opposed to a peripheral player such as Tunisia. As the first Arab state to make peace with Israel, Egypt has much greater strategic importance to the United States than Tunisia. Egypt has long received major U.S. aid and supported Washington's efforts to promote a wider Arab-Israeli peace. In interviews in recent days, officials acknowledged that the United States had limited influence over many actors in the region, and that the upheaval in Egypt, in particular, could scramble its foreign-policy agenda.

Robert Danin of the Council on Foreign Relations said Secretary Clinton's remarks for the first time appeared to make clear what the United States wants to see in Egypt: genuine change that originates from the government rather than a dramatic overthrow as occurred in Tunisia.

"This is not a walking away from the alliance with Egypt in any way but, at the same time, putting the Egyptian government on notice that changes are going to have to come pretty quickly," Mr. Danin said. "It is trying to lay out a way there can be managed change if the regime is responsive to the people," he said. "It (the Obama administration) doesn't want to see the means adopted in Tunisia -- which would necessitate the leadership to flee."⁵

So the U.S. is proceeding cautiously, balancing the democratic aspirations of young Arabs with cold-eyed strategic and commercial interests. That sometimes involves supporting autocratic and unpopular governments — which has turned many Arab youth against the United States.

While Tunisia and the Egyptian government are crucial allies to Washington, the population is very suspicious of American motives, and the potential for Islamic extremism lurks. "These countries are going to go at a different pace," said Daniel B. Shapiro, a senior Middle East adviser on the National Security Council. "One couldn't, or shouldn't try, to come up with a cookie-cutter ideal of how to approach it.

⁵ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/01/26/hillary-clinton-egypt-protests_n_814442.html



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