

Statement of
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And
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Senate Foreign Relations Committee

“Women and the Arab Spring”

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Thank you. I am honored to be here this afternoon with my colleague Dr. Tamara Wittes to discuss the status of women in the Arab Spring and their participation in the political transitions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. We also will talk about U.S. government efforts to empower and enable the women to continue and enhance their participation in the political, economic, and social lives of their societies. The people of post-revolutionary Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya have a real opportunity to consolidate their hard-fought democratic gains, but this will not be possible if their women do not participate fully in the political process leading to democracy.

I'd like to extend my thanks to Chairwoman Boxer and Chairman Casey as well as Senators DeMint and Risch for convening today's important hearing. I would also like to thank the Senate, particularly the women Senators on both sides of the aisle, as well as several male Senators, for your farsighted leadership on this issue. Senate Resolution 109 reaffirms the rights and roles of the women in the Middle East and North Africa by declaring, “The empowerment of women is inextricably linked to the potential of nations to generate economic growth and sustainable democracy.”

It is those inextricable links that I would like to discuss here today. This year, the Nobel Peace Prize Committee highlighted these connections by recognizing three

women who worked to bring peace and freedom to their countries. One of whom, Tawakkul Karman, is a leader in Yemen's struggle for democracy and human rights. When I met with her last week, she told me that Yemeni women, who used to be invisible in the public square, are now significantly engaged in the protest movement. She said that women are the solution for the myriad problems – political, social, and economic – facing the Arab world, and that the condition of a country is reflected in the condition of its women. Because she believes that women are instrumental to freedom and democracy, she stressed that “it is in the interests of dictators to keep women politically excluded from politics.”

I believe that many women woke up with the Arab Spring, and they will not go back to sleep. In Tunisia, which held its first fully democratic election on October 23, women won around 25 percent of the seats in the new Constituent Assembly. Egypt has begun its election season, and women are plunging into the political fray. New constitutions will come from the assemblies constructed in these elections, and it is vital that gender equality to be enshrined in the constitutions at the very beginning. In Libya, after four decades of brutal dictatorship and eight months of struggle for liberation, in which women played a vital role, the Libyan people can celebrate their freedom and the beginning of a new era of promise.

Democracy is often messy. There are people who will advocate positions and policies for their countries with which we will disagree. All three North African countries are still works in progress. Most recently, when proclaiming Libya's liberation, National Transitional Council Chairman Mustafa Abdul-Jalil said that certain laws, such as those restricting polygamy, would be voided on the basis of Sharia. Libya's women reacted with outrage. As one noted, “these declarations created feelings of pain and bitterness among women who sacrificed so many martyrs.” After the Chairman's comments, rightly, triggered domestic and international uproar, the Transitional Council quickly clarified that there was “no chance” that Libya would become a theocracy. Across the region, these new governments are still learning the requirements of human rights and democracy while, at the same time, balancing the expressed desires of their progressive and conservative citizens. This is not only a critical moment to engage these emerging leaders in building sustainable new democracies but also the time to support women's human rights and to advance women's progress. Each country will evolve differently.

According to the Arab Development Report, “forging bonds of equal citizenship among all members of society, and establishing government by rule of law in Arab countries are prerequisites for addressing political, social, and personal insecurity.”

The Report makes clear that the lack of women's political and economic participation is one of the key reasons for the region's underdevelopment. Different countries have heeded the recommendations of this report to varying degrees. In Tunisia, all the major political parties made pre- and post-election promises endorsing full citizenship and according rights and duties for all Tunisians. We will hold them to their word. In Egypt, the best-organized parties seem unconcerned about the need to include women as candidates, and party leaders have made almost no effort to champion women's rights. And in Libya, the transition authorities have yet to bring women into the political process in any significant way; however, we continue to press for their full participation.

When women are discriminated against in the political arena, their experiences, talents, and perspectives are shut out. This will affect the new democracies not just in the political arena but also economically and socially, diminishing the prospect for a free and secure future. The transitions will be both political and economic, and women in leadership positions can only help to overcome the disturbing economic legacies left by decades of dictatorship by improving productivity and increasing economic opportunities. Studies show that women-run small and growing businesses are accelerants of economic growth and women's increased participation in the workforce grows economic prosperity.

Women in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya played a frontline role in bringing down entrenched dictatorships. They were in Tahrir Square, in the streets of Tunisia, and across Libya standing shoulder to shoulder with the men, struggling for a better future. However, there are actors in these societies who clearly intend, and even often vocally express their desire, to push women back. Some claim the West is trying to impose its values on the Arab people by promoting women's rights, but this is neither a Western issue, nor an Arab issue, nor a religious issue. It is a matter of universal human rights. As Tawakkul reminded me, women across the region are fighting not just for women's rights, but for human rights and human dignity.

Shortly after the events unfolded in Egypt and Tunisia, I met there with women who had been on the frontlines yet who were now struggling to take their rightful place in building their countries' futures. The Egyptian women worried about how the post-revolution process was unfolding and the Tunisian women had concerns about preserving their rights. More recently, I spoke to Libyan activists who had run supplies to the rebels and sold their homes for medical supplies. All these women told me they fought for freedom and democracy. The people's revolutions

of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya were and are struggles for the universal values of equality, freedom, and opportunity for all.

As these new democracies evolve, the United States and the wider international community must stand ready to help them build representative governments from the ruins of tyranny. As the new leaders emerge, we must clearly communicate that democracy without the full participation of half its population is a contradiction in terms and that an economy without the inclusion of women will not prosper. Women on the front lines of these transitioning countries themselves are sending this message, and they deserve our recognition and support for what they have done and are doing to strengthen their nascent democracies and to create more vibrant and equitable societies.

The Situation of Women in Tunisia

Tunisians can be rightly proud of their recent elections. Women and men, young and old voted in large numbers across the country. Results indicate that women won around 25 percent of the seats in the new Constituent Assembly. Tunisia has a long and storied history of women's rights. It was the first Arab state to abolish polygamy; the first to grant women professional rights; and it was at the forefront in establishing progressive family laws. Women took an active and visible role in administering the October election; many of the polling station workers were women, and some were station chiefs.

We do not know what direction Tunisia will take as the political parties begin coalition negotiations to form the country's first democratically elected government. All political parties who won significant seats responded to Human Rights Watch's pre-election survey indicating their support for the principles of gender equality and non-discrimination. They all, including the moderate Islamist al-Nahda party, favored maintaining the country's progressive personal status codes which grant Tunisian women the same rights as Tunisian men. Since its election into the Constituent Assembly, al-Nahda has also publicly expressed its disinclination to impose a conservative dress code upon Tunisian women. These are all promising signs. Tunisian civil society is working to build the skills necessary to stay vigilant and to hold their government accountable. Support for Tunisian civil society coupled with diplomatic engagement will provide a concrete opportunity to positively affect the new government and help Tunisia join the community of democracies.

During the transition, Tunisia's Ministry for Women's Affairs, though small, was active in promoting voter education for women for the Constituent Assembly elections. This Ministry has also worked to assist businesswomen in rural, oft-neglected parts of Tunisia to start up enterprises through microcredit. Throughout Tunisia, several women's civil society groups have been established since the January 14 revolution, providing a range of social services, including civic and voter education. In this period of democratic transition, which has provided all Tunisians greater freedom of expression, these civil society groups are working tirelessly to maintain the strong role Tunisian women traditionally played in their society.

The Situation of Women in Egypt

As Egypt's transition unfolds, there are fears that the previous gains made by Egyptian women will be reversed and that they will be increasingly excluded from the process. Although women played a significant role in the protests that brought down Hosni Mubarak, the role of women in Egypt's governance during the transition has been very limited. No women were included on the committee that drafted Egypt's transitional constitutional declaration, and only one female minister serves in the cabinet. In the continuing protests after the fall of Mubarak, there have been several disturbing incidents. On March 8, hundreds of women were attacked when they gathered in Tahrir Square to call for a greater voice in Egypt's transition. In May, when the military cleared Tahrir Square, it arrested and detained dozens of female demonstrators, subjecting them to degrading and dehumanizing from Tahrir, it reportedly conducted "virginity tests". The transitional government promised it would not happen again, but it has not apologized.

In late July, during a reshuffle of provincial governors, the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces did not appoint any female governors. The Minister of Local Development even claimed that women could not be appointed governors because they would not be able to go out into the streets in the current security environment to address social problems. The SCAF also removed the 64-seat parliamentary quota and dismantled the Ministry of Women's Affairs.

There is now no evident champion for women's rights in the Egyptian government; compounding this challenge, some Egyptians are criticizing previous gains, like the progressive laws on divorce, and against female genital cutting and child marriage, as tainted because of Mrs. Mubarak's work on the issue. They refuse to recognize them as the decades-long work of Egyptian women leaders. Moreover,

some conservative political and social forces are taking advantage of Egypt's more open political environment to call for a rollback in women's rights.

In spite of these setbacks, Egyptian civil society organizations have defended the role of women in the transition and are advocating for reforms that protect women's rights. In June 2011, the United States promoted a conference in Cairo, co-sponsored by International IDEA and UN Women, to raise the profile of women's rights in democratic transitions. Egyptian participants at this conference produced a charter asserting their right to play a role in shaping the next Egyptian constitution and to be treated equally by the government. Following the conference, Egyptian women's rights groups have continued to publicly raise their concerns about the exclusion of women from power. Even with all these hurdles, women will take part in the upcoming elections as voters, candidates, and political party members, and the U.S. government is supporting such efforts.

The Situation of Women in Libya

Women played a determinative role in the liberation of Libya. Since the first days of the revolution, when Libyan women formed sewing circles to create the ubiquitous independence flags, Libyan women have been at the heart of the struggle. Women leaders founded some of the most promising and effective non-profit initiatives. They are now asking for our help in developing the leadership skills they need to take a strong role in the new Libya. They will be crucial as a new Libyan state and society take shape.

I recently met with one of the women active in the revolution. At the end of 2010, she had just left Libya to take a lucrative position in Dubai when the revolution began on February 17, 2011. Within days, she went from frantically trying to stay in touch with her family in Libya, to setting up an anti-regime media center in Dubai, to running a logistical cell for the rebellion in Malta. She has now returned to Tripoli to be a part of the new Libya. When I asked her if she had encountered resistance from revolutionaries on the ground, she told me that the liberation fighters not only wanted, but expected people like her "to rebuild our country as it should be."

There are small, but very active, groups of women across the country who expect to take their place in the leadership of the new Libya. For example, a Benghazi-based professional women's committee is supporting women's participation in the new democracy. Other women-dominated groups are working to restart the health and education sectors. Politically, the discourse regarding women's rights and the

role of women is at a nascent stage and here the international community can help build the foundation for full and equal citizenship for all Libyans.

When Secretary Clinton met with leaders of the Transitional Council, she laid out clear expectations for the full and representative participation of women in the transition, and it will be the Libyan women themselves who will decide the roles they will play in the new Libya.

Women, Peace, and Security

What we know from other societies in transition is that when women play an active and inclusive role in societies – from participating in the drafting of new constitutions to rebuilding economies – the whole country benefits. As we saw in South Africa, Rwanda, and elsewhere, women’s full participation improves governance, reduces conflict, and increases economic prosperity. Eleven years ago, the U.N. Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1325, recognizing the importance of women’s representation at all levels of conflict resolution, post-conflict peacebuilding, and governance. We have witnessed the capacity of women as peacemakers in each of these revolutions. In Tunisia, women have been vital in the push for fair representation and gender parity in constitution building and the electoral process. In Egypt, women were essential in ensuring that acts of revolution and protest remained peaceful. Now in Libya, where women played critical roles in revolution, they stand ready to create a new and democratic society. The act of participation has irreversibly changed the role of women in these societies. It is imperative that the international community actively support these women to get the skills they need to play a representative role in the political transitions.

U.S. Support for Women Leaders

Just a few weeks ago, when Secretary Clinton was at the United Nations for the opening of the General Assembly, she attended a special meeting with female heads of state and foreign ministers on women’s political participation and the Arab Spring. The leaders signed a joint resolution that stressed “the critical importance of women’s political participation in all contexts, including in times of peace, conflict and in all stages of political transition.” Later that week in addressing heads of state from around the world at the opening of the General Assembly, President Obama noted that “no country can realize its potential if half its population cannot reach theirs” and called on all nations “announce the steps we

are taking to break down the economic and political barriers that stand in the way of women and girls” within the next year.

While visiting Egypt and Tunisia, in forums large and small, numerous women told me that leadership training programs enable them to be effective candidates for national and local offices. Moreover, because of the many obstacles to their obtaining political power, women need strong and broad alliances to enable them to surmount the various barriers.

Civil society activists require capacity building support for the range of needs that they confront. One of the key ways that women have gained access to power is through their engagement with NGOs. Many have developed the leadership skills and relevant experience to run for office through their work with national and international NGOs. Another area of need is capacity building for governance; it is not enough to be elected or to be appointed to government service without the ability to exercise that responsibility effectively. To address this need, the United States has invested in programs to strengthen the skills and leadership abilities of female parliamentarians and other elected officials.

Through our efforts to ensure that women are integral to all aspects of U.S. foreign policy, we have indentified ways to increase women’s opportunities for political empowerment, participation, and decision-making. Many U.S. trainings, exchanges, and small grants programs are aimed at improving women’s political participation and leadership abilities.

We believe that a further step that would send a powerful and unequivocal message of support to the women in the region is for the United States to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. This treaty reflects the fundamental principle that women’s rights are human rights. U.S. ratification would lend much needed validation and support to advocates around the world, including in the Middle East region, who seek to replicate in their own countries the strong protections against discrimination that we have in the United States. Some governments use the fact that the U.S. has not ratified the treaty as a pretext for not living up to their own obligations under it. We would eliminate this frequently heard excuse by opponents of women’s rights in many countries by ratifying this important treaty. Tunisia and Egypt have signed and ratified the Convention while Libya has acceded to it. Women in these countries will continue to use their countries’ ratification of the Convention as a lever to move their new governments to protect women’s human rights.

I believe we have a responsibility to do everything we can to support these new democracies. In doing so, we contribute to their viability, peace, and security. And I believe that stable and prosperous democracies in the Arab world will directly contribute to our own national security.

Conclusion

Women's participation in civil society and government decision-making are key ingredients to building democracy. It is a simple fact that no country can progress or prosper if half its citizens are left behind. Progress for women and progress for democracy go hand in hand. This is also true for the economy. One of the best indicators for the overall economic health of any country is the economic and educational attainment of women.

My distinguished colleague Deputy Assistant Secretary Wittes will go into more depth about U.S. specific efforts in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya in her remarks. Let me reiterate the urgent need to support women at this critical juncture in history. We must support them publically and privately. We must empower them politically and economically.

Women everywhere continue to face challenges and barriers to productive participation in political engagement and government. But this is particularly acute as countries transition from decades under a dictatorial order to a new world of democratic possibility. Tunisia was a middle income country with a long tradition of empowered women. Its needs are specific and limited. Egypt, on the other hand, has a wider range of more challenging obstacles; nonetheless, the potential for progress is there. Lastly, Libya is a rich country, but it is emerging from a brutal conflict that has traumatized thousands; so its future, while hopeful, is uncertain.

The message of support communicated by this hearing, which builds on the bipartisan actions taken by the Senate to support women's full and equal participation in the new democracies of the Arab world, is of great significance not only to the women and men of the region but to the entire world. We should not underestimate the power of our unified global voice for the rights and freedom of women and minorities.

The State Department and USAID are deeply committed to helping these new democracies. This means full citizenship for all citizens, regardless of gender, sect, or ethnicity. We embrace the opportunity to continue to promote women's

empowerment and participation at all levels of society. We will work in partnership with our Embassies overseas to identify and support emerging women leaders and defenders of democracy. This task requires collaboration and leadership at all levels of the U.S. government and with the international community. And it also requires partnership with the Congress to ensure that women in the region know that the full weight of the American people support their pursuit of freedom. Through these efforts, more women will be able to take part in the democratic transition and serve as trailblazers for future generations.

Thank you, and I look forward to answering any questions.

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