Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

Keynote Address: Remarks on the Maghreb in Transition

Speaker:
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Secretary of State

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(Applause.)

SECRETARY HILLARY CLINTON: Thank you. (Sustained applause.) Thank you all. Thank you very much, and a special word of thanks to a friend and someone whom I admire greatly, General Scowcroft. His many years of distinguished service to our country is a great tribute in every respect.

Thanks also to Jon Alterman and CSIS for hosting this conference on "The Maghreb in Transition: Seeking Stability in an Era of Uncertainty." I also wish to acknowledge Dr. Terrab for his strong support of this important conference and members of the diplomatic corps as well.

Now, why are we here, and why is this conference so timely? Well, to start with, what happens in this dynamic region has far-reaching consequences for our own security and prosperity. And we know very well that it is most important to the people of this region whose aspirations and ambitions deserve to be met.

But recent events have raised questions about what lies ahead, what lies ahead for the region, what lies ahead for the rest of us who have watched with great hope, as General Scowcroft said, the events that have unfolded in the Maghreb: a terrorist attack in Benghazi, the burning of an American school in Tunis. These and other scenes of anger and violence have understandably led Americans to ask, what is happening? What is happening to the promise of the Arab Spring? And what does this mean for the United States?

Well, I certainly think it's important to ask these questions and to seek answers, as you are doing today. And let me, on a personal note, start with what happened in Benghazi. No one wants to find out exactly what happened more than I do. I've appointed an accountability review board that has already started examining whether our security procedures were appropriate, whether they were properly implemented and what lessons we can and must learn for the future. And we are working as thoroughly and expeditiously as possible, knowing that we cannot afford to sacrifice accuracy to speed. And of course our government is sparing no effort in tracking down the terrorists who perpetrated this attack. And we are focused, as we must, on what more needs to be done right now to protect our people and our facilities.

We had another terrible attack yesterday. I strongly condemn the killing of a longtime Yemeni employee at our embassy in Sanaa, and we are working with Yemeni authorities to investigate this attack and to bring those responsible to justice as well.

But throughout all of this, we must not only focus on the headlines. We have to keep in mind the trend lines. We have to remain focused on the broader strategic questions posed by these democratic transitions and their impact on American interests and values.

Let me start by stating the obvious: Nobody should have ever thought this would be an easy road. I certainly didn't. However, it is important to look at the full picture, to weigh the violent acts of a small number of extremists against the aspirations and actions of the region's people and governments. That broader view supports rather than discredits the promise of the Arab revolutions. It reaffirms that instead of letting mobs and extremists speak for entire

countries, we should listen to what the elected governments and free citizens are saying. They want more freedom, more justice, more opportunity, not more violence. And they want better relations not only with the United States but with the world, not worse.

I have no illusions about how complicated this is. After all, American foreign policy has long been shaped by debates over how to balance our interests in security and stability with our values in supporting freedom and democracy. Recent revolutions have intensified these debates by creating a new berth of freedom but also by unseating old partners and unleashing unpredictable new forces.

As I said last fall at the National Democratic Institute, we have to be honest that America's policies in the region will always reflect the full range of our interests and values: promoting democracy and human rights and defeating al-Qaida, defending our allies and partners and also ensuring a secure supply of energy. And there will be times when not all of our interests and values align. We work to align them, but we do so acknowledging reality.

And it's true that we tailor our tactics for promoting democratic change to the conditions on the ground in each country. After all, it would be foolish to take a one-size-fits-all approach, regardless of circumstances or historical trends. But in the long run, the enduring cooperation we seek and that our interests and our values demand is difficult to sustain without democratic legitimacy and public consent.

Weeks before the revolution in Egypt began, I told Arab leaders gathered in Doha that the region's foundations were sinking into the sand. It was clear even then that the status quo was unsustainable, that refusal to change was itself becoming a threat to stability. So for the United States, supporting democratic transitions is not a matter of idealism. It is a strategic necessity. And we will not return to the false choice between freedom and stability. And we will not pull back our support for emerging democracies when the going gets rough. That would be a costly strategic mistake that would, I believe, undermine both our interests and our values.

Now, we recognize that these transitions are not America's to manage and certainly not ours to win or lose. But we have to stand with those who are working every day to strengthen democratic institutions, defend universal rights and drive inclusive economic growth. That will produce more capable partners and more durable security over the long term.

Today these transitions are entering a phase that must be marked more by compromise than by confrontation, by politics more than protests, politics that deliver economic reforms and jobs so that people can pursue their livelihoods and provide for their families, politics that will be competitive and even heated, but rooted in democratic rules and norms that apply to everyone, Islamists and secularists, Muslims and Christians, conservatives and liberals, parties and candidates of every stripe.

Everyone must reject violence, terrorism and extremism, abide by the rule of law, support independent judiciaries and uphold fundamental freedoms. Upholding the rights and dignity of all citizens, regardless of faith, ethnicity or gender, should be expected. And then, of course, we look to governments to let go of power when their time comes, just as the revolutionary Libyan

Transitional National Council did this past August, transferring authority to the newly elected legislature in a ceremony that Ambassador Chris Stevens cited as the highlight of his time in the country.

Achieving genuine democracy and broad-based growth will be a long and difficult process. We know that from our own history. More than 235 years after our own revolution, we are still working toward that more perfect union. So one should expect setbacks along the way, times when some will surely ask if it was all worth it. But going back to the way things were in December 2010 isn't just undesirable; it is impossible.

So this is the context in which we have to view recent events and shape our approach going forward. And let me explain where that leads us. Now, since this is a conference on the Maghreb, that's where I'll focus, because after all, that's where the Arab revolution started and where an international coalition helped stop a dictator from slaughtering his people and where just last month we saw such disturbing violence. But let's look at what's actually happening on the ground, especially in light of recent events. We have to, as always, be clear-eyed about the threat of violent extremism. A year of democratic transition was never going to drain away reservoirs of radicalism built up through decades of dictatorship, nor was that enough time to stand up fully effective and responsible security forces to replace the repressive ones of the past.

As we've warned from the beginning, there are extremists who seek to exploit periods of instability and hijack these democratic transitions. All the while, al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and other terrorist groups are trying to expand their reach from a new stronghold in northern Mali. But that is not the full story, far from it. The terrorists who attacked our mission in Benghazi did not represent the millions of Libyan people who want peace and deplore violence.

And in the days that followed, tens of thousands of Libyans poured into the streets to mourn Ambassador Stevens, who had been a steadfast champion of their revolution. You saw the signs; one read, thugs and killers don't represent Benghazi or Islam. And on their own initiative, the people of Benghazi overran extremist bases and insisted that militias disarm and accept the rule of law. That was as inspiring a sight as any we saw in the revolutions, and it points to the undimmed promise of the Arab Spring by starting down the path of democratic politics.

Libyans and Arabs across the region have firmly rejected the extremists' argument that violence and death are the only way to reclaim dignity and achieve justice. In Tripoli, the country's transitional leaders condemned the attack. They fired the top security officials responsible for Benghazi. Then the government issued an ultimatum to militias across the country: Disarm and disband in 48 hours or face the consequences. As many as 10 major armed groups complied. Now, militias and extremists remain a significant problem in Libya, but there is an effort to address it that has now taken hold throughout the country. As Libya grapples with the challenges of forming a government, the international community needs to support its efforts to bring these militias to heel and provide security for all of its citizens.

Consider Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab revolutions. Last year an Islamist party won a plurality of the votes in an open, competitive election. I know some in Washington took this as an omen of doom, but these new leaders formed a coalition with secular parties and promised to uphold universal rights and freedoms, including for women. And the United States made it clear that we would be watching closely and would assess the new government by its actions, not its words. This past February in Tunis, students and civil society activists shared with me their fears about extremists seeking to derail their transition to lasting democracy but also their hopes that responsible leaders and accountable institutions would be strong enough and willing enough to turn back that challenge. And indeed, we have seen an intense debate play out in Tunisian society.

For example, early drafts of the new constitution labeled women as complementary to men, but Tunisia's active civil society raised strong objections, and eventually the National Constituent Assembly amended the text to recognize women's equality. Civil society is wise to remain vigilant and to exercise their hard-earned rights to safeguard their new democracy, like the hundreds of Tunisian women who recently took to the streets to protest on behalf of a woman charged with indecency after she was raped by police officers.

These competing visions of Tunisia's future were put to the test when violent extremists attacked the U.S. embassy in Tunis and burned the American school nearby. How did the Tunisian people and government respond?

First the government increased security around our embassy and promised to assist with repairs to the school, which they have done. Then they publicly committed to confront violent groups and prevent Tunisia from becoming a safe haven for international terrorism. Following through on these pledges is essential. Those responsible for the attacks must be brought to justice. The government must provide security for diplomatic missions and create a secure environment for foreign residents and visitors, and the rule of law must extend to everyone throughout the country.

The country's leaders also took to the airwaves, to newspaper pages, even Facebook and Twitter to denounce both the attacks and the extremist ideology behind them, putting their own political capital on the line. The foreign minister flew to Washington to stand with me and publicly condemn the violence. And so we continue to support those changes that are occurring in Libya and in Tunisia and those leaders and citizens who understand what is expected of them if they are to fulfill their own hopes.

Now, the situation in the rest of the Maghreb is different. Morocco and Algeria have not experienced revolutions, but recent events have also tested their values and resolve. Last year, when citizens of Morocco called for change, Moroccan society, under King Mohammed VI, answered with major constitutional reforms, followed by early elections and expanded authorities for parliament. An Islamist party leads the new ruling coalition, along with a variety of other parties, after 13 years in the opposition, and we've been encouraged that its leaders have sought to engage all Moroccans and have focused on creating jobs and fighting corruption. And we continue to urge them to follow through on all of their commitments for political and economic reform.

Last month, with anti-American protesters in the streets across the cities of Morocco, the foreign minister traveled to Washington for our first ever strategic dialogue. He could have avoided the cameras, but instead, he strongly condemned the attack in Benghazi, embraced a broader partnership with the United States and pledged that his country would continue working toward democracy and the rule of law.

Algeria also has much to gain by embracing the changes that are taking place around it, and we have seen some progress. The government held parliamentary elections in May and invited international observers to monitor them for the first time, and it moved quickly last month to protect diplomatic missions, including the U.S. embassy, and to defuse tensions in the streets. But still Algeria has a lot of work to do to uphold universal rights and create space for civil society, a message I delivered at the highest levels in person in February.

Now, what do these snapshots and stories from across the region tell us? On the one hand, last month's violence revealed strains of extremism that threaten those nations as well as the broader region and even the United States. On the other hand, we've seen actions that would have been hard to imagine a few years ago, democratically elected leaders and free people in Arab countries standing up for a peaceful, pluralist future. It is way too soon to say how these transitions will play out, but what's not in doubt is that America has a big stake in the outcome.

Last month at the United Nations General Assembly in New York, I met with leaders from across the region, and I told each of them that the United States will continue to pursue a strategy to support emerging democracies as they work to provide effective security grounded in the rule of law to spur economic growth and bolster democratic institutions. We've made those three priorities the hallmark of America's involvement in the region. We've convened donor conferences to coordinate assistance, leverage new partnerships through the G-8, the Community of Democracies, the OECD, and we have stepped up our engagement with the Arab League, signing the first-ever memorandum of understanding for a strategic dialogue between us.

But we recognize that words, whether they come from us or others, are cheap. And when we talk about investing in responsible leaders and accountable democratic institutions, it has to be followed by actual investments. So we have mobilized more than $1 billion in targeted assistance since the start of the revolutions. And the Obama administration has requested from Congress a new $770 million fund that would be tied to concrete benchmarks for political and economic reforms, and I again urge Congress to move forward on this priority.

But let me briefly just address the three parts of our strategy, starting with security. The recent riots and lawlessness underscore the challenges of safeguarding public safety in free societies and reforming security forces. For decades, those forces protected regimes. Now their job is to protect citizens, especially against the threat from violent extremists. For some time, al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and other terrorist groups have launched attacks and kidnappings from Northern Mali into neighboring countries. Now with the chaos and ethnic conflict there allowing these groups to carve out a larger safe haven, they are seeking to extend their reach and their networks in multiple directions.

So we are using every tool we can to help our partners fight extremism and meet their security challenges. We recently embedded additional foreign service officers with regional expertise into the U.S. Africa Command to better integrate our approach. Across the region, diplomats, development experts and military personnel are working hand in hand. Across the region also, we're partnering with the security officials of these new governments who are moving away from the repressive approaches that helped fuel radicalization in the past, and we're trying to help them develop strategies grounded in the rule of law and human rights.

We're helping border guards upgrade their equipment and tighten their patrols so that weapons don't flood the region even more than they already have. We're helping train prosecutors and build forensic labs that can produce evidence that stands up in courts. And last month, just days after the riots in Tunis, we launched a new partnership with Tunisia to train police and other justice officials, and we were very pleased that Tunisia also agreed to host a new international training center that will help officials from across the region develop means to protect their citizens' security and their liberty.

Now, the nations of the Maghreb are not the first to struggle with the challenge of protecting a new democracy. And one of the lessons we've learned around the world is that training, funding and equipment will only go so far. It takes political will to make the hard choices and demand the accountability that is necessary for strong institutions and lasting security, and it takes changes in mindsets to make those reforms stick.

In all my conversations with high-ranking officials in these countries, I recognize that particularly in Tunisia and Libya, the people I'm talking to were often victims of security forces, imprisoned, seeking – exiled, beaten, some cases tortured. And for them all of a sudden to find themselves on the side of security forces, even ones that are of the new regime, takes a mental change. And they have admitted that it is a responsibility that they now understand they must assume.

The United States is also stepping up our counterterrorism efforts, helping the countries of North Africa target the support structure of the extremist group, particularly al-Qaida and its affiliates, closing safe havens, cutting off financing, countering their ideology, denying them recruits. Our Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership is building the capacity of 10 countries, providing training and support so they can better work together to disrupt terrorist networks and prevent attacks. We are expanding our work with civil society organizations in specific terrorist hot spots, particular villages, prisons and schools.

Now, the Maghreb's economic and social challenges fueled the revolutions and the calls for reform. And in order to succeed, these emerging democratic governments need to show they can deliver concrete results. So that is the second area we're focused on, working with small- and medium-sized enterprises which create jobs and alternatives to radicalism, bringing women and young people into the formal economy, providing capital and training for entrepreneurs, helping emergency – emerging democracies update their economic regulations, their investment laws, their trade policies so their private sectors can actually flourish.

We're establishing a Tunisian-American Enterprise Fund with an initial capitalization of $20 million to stimulate investment in the private sector and provide businesses with needed capital. The Overseas Private Investment Corporation, OPIC, is offering $50 million in loans and guarantees, and the Millennium Challenge Corporation is helping address long-term constraints to economic growth. We've provided export training for small business owners and job training to hundreds of young Tunisians, and I'm particularly proud of the new $10 million scholarship fund, which we launched in August, to help Tunisian students study at American universities and colleges.

We also look forward to working on economic issues with the new Libyan government once it's formed. One of our top priorities is helping nations trade more with each other. That, after all, will create new jobs for their citizens and markets for their products. But today, North Africa is one of the least-integrated regions in the world. It doesn't have to be that way, and opening the border between Algeria and Morocco would be an important step in moving toward that integration.

The third key area in our strategy is strengthening democratic institutions and advancing political reforms, not an easy process, as we can see from the difficulty in forming a government in Libya. And political progress has to grow from the inside, not imposed from the outside or abroad. But there are ways we can and are helping. In Libya, for example, the United States has trained hundreds of lawyers and civil society activists on election laws and offered tutorials to campaign managers and candidates in the run-up to the recent elections. Now we're encouraging civil society be fully engaged in drafting a new constitution that will protect the equal rights of all Libyan citizens. Similar efforts are under way across the Maghreb tailored to local needs and conditions.

And none of this is happening in a vacuum. The transitions occurring in the Maghreb are linked, as you well know, with developments across the wider Middle East. Egypt, of course, the largest Arab nation, cornerstone of the region, we've seen its new elected leadership say that the success of Egypt's democratic transition depends on building consensus and speaking to the needs and concerns of all Egyptians, men and women, of all faiths and communities. Now, we stand with the Egyptian people in their quest for universal freedoms and protections, and we've made the point that Egypt's international standing depends both on peaceful relations with its neighbors and also on the choices it makes at home, and whether or not it fulfills its own promises to its own people.

In Syria, the Assad regime continues to wage brutal war against its own people even as territory slips from its grasp. I recently announced major new contributions of humanitarian aid and assistance for the civilian opposition, and we remain committed, with our like-minded partners, to increase pressure on the regime.

And in Yemen, where we supported negotiations that eventually achieved a peaceful transition, we are working to prevent al-Qaida and other extremists from threatening these emerging, fragile democratic institutions and prevent them also from finding a safe haven from which to stage new attacks.

And when I met with King Abdullah of Jordan last month, we discussed the importance of continuing reforms to move his country toward more democracy and prosperity.

So in all of these places and many others, the United States is helping the people of those nations chart their own destinies and realize the full measure of their own human dignity. Dignity is a word that means many things to different people and cultures, but it does speak to something universal in all of us. As one Egyptian observed in the wake of that country's revolution, freedom and dignity are more important than food and water. When you eat in humiliation, you can't taste the food.

But dignity does not come from avenging perceived insults, especially with violence that can never be justified. It comes from taking responsibility for oneself and one's community. And if you look around the world today, those countries focused on fostering growth rather than fomenting grievance are pulling ahead: building schools instead of burning them; investing in their people's creativity, not encouraging their rage; empowering women, not excluding them; opening their economies and societies to more connections with the wider world, not shutting off the Internet or attacking embassies.

I remain convinced that the people of the Arab world do not want to trade the tyranny of a dictator for the tyranny of a mob. There is no dignity in that. The people of Benghazi told this world loudly and clearly, when they rejected the extremists in their midst, what they hoped for. And so did the leaders of Libya when they challenged the militias. And so did the Tunisians who spoke out against violence and hatred. That is the message we should take from the events of the last month.

Now, I want to add and close with one more thought about what happened in Benghazi, because as you might expect, that is, for me and for all the men and women at the State Department, very personal. Diplomacy, by its nature, has to be often practiced in dangerous places. We send people to diplomatic posts in 170 countries around the world. And yes, some of those are in war and conflict zones. Others are in unstable countries with complex threats and no U.S. military presence. That is the reality of the world we live in, and we will never prevent every act of violence or terrorism or achieve perfect security. Our people cannot live in bunkers and do their jobs. But it is our solemn responsibility to constantly improve, to reduce the risks our people face and make sure they have the resources they need to do those jobs we expect from them. And of course, nobody takes that more seriously than I and the security professionals at the State Department do.

Chris Stevens understood that diplomats must operate in many places where soldiers do not or cannot, where there are no other boots on the ground and security is far from guaranteed. And like so many of our brave colleagues and those who served in our armed forces as well, he volunteered for his assignments. Last year our ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, was assaulted in Damascus by pro-regime thugs. But he insisted on continuing to meet with peaceful protesters and serving as a living manifestation of America's support. And when he drove to the battered city of Hama, the people there covered his car with flowers.

People like Chris and Robert represent diplomacy and America at its, and our, best. They know that when America is absent, especially from the dangerous places, there are consequences. Extremism takes root, our interests suffer and our security at home is threatened. So we will continue sending our diplomats and development experts to dangerous places. The United States will not retreat. We will keep leading, and we will stay engaged in the Maghreb and everywhere in the world, including in those hard places where America's interests and values are at stake. That's who we are, and that's the best way to honor those whom we have lost. And that's also how we ensure our country's global leadership for decades to come.

Thank you all very much. (Sustained applause.)

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