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REMARKS

**Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and
Moroccan Foreign Minister Saad-Eddine Al-Othmani
At the Opening Plenary of the U.S.-Morocco Strategic Dialogue**

**September 13, 2012
Benjamin Franklin Room**

SECRETARY CLINTON: Good morning. Well, let me welcome our friends and colleagues from Morocco here to the Benjamin Franklin Room on the eighth floor of the State Department for this very important first session of the U.S.-Morocco Strategic Dialogue. Before I begin to address the significance of this Strategic Dialogue and the next step in our long relations with Morocco, I want to say a few words about the events unfolding in the world today.

We are closely watching what is happening in Yemen and elsewhere, and we certainly hope and expect that there will be steps taken to avoid violence and prevent the escalation of protests into violence.

I also want to take a moment to address the video circulating on the internet that has led to these protests in a number of countries. Let me state very clearly – and I hope it is obvious – that the United States Government had absolutely nothing to do with this video. We absolutely reject its content and message. America's commitment to religious tolerance goes back to the very beginning of our nation. And as you know, we are home to people of all religions, many of whom came to this country seeking the right to exercise their own religion, including, of course, millions of Muslims. And we have the greatest respect for people of faith.

To us, to me personally, this video is disgusting and reprehensible. It appears to have a deeply cynical purpose: to denigrate a great religion and to provoke rage. But as I said yesterday, there is no justification, none at all, for responding to this video with violence. We condemn the violence that has resulted in the strongest terms, and we greatly appreciate that many Muslims in the United States and around the world have spoken out on this issue.

Violence, we believe, has no place in religion and is no way to honor religion. Islam, like other religions, respects the fundamental dignity of human beings, and it is a violation of that fundamental dignity to wage attacks on innocents. As long as there are those who are willing to shed blood and take innocent life in the name of religion, the name of God, the world will never know a true and lasting peace. It is especially wrong for violence to be directed against diplomatic missions. These are places whose very purpose is peaceful: to promote better understanding across countries and cultures. All governments have a responsibility to protect those spaces and people, because to attack an embassy is to attack the idea that we can work together to build understanding and a better future.

Now, I know it is hard for some people to understand why the United States cannot or does not just prevent these kinds of reprehensible videos from ever seeing the light of day. Now, I would note that in today's world with today's technologies, that is impossible. But even if it were possible, our country does have a long tradition of free expression which is enshrined in our Constitution and our law, and we do not stop individual citizens from expressing their views no matter how distasteful they may be.

There are, of course, different views around the world about the outer limits of free speech and free expression, but there should be no debate about the simple proposition that violence in response to speech is not acceptable. We all – whether we are leaders in government, leaders in civil society or religious leaders – must draw the line at violence. And any responsible leader should be standing up now and drawing that line.

I wanted to begin with this statement, because, as our Moroccan friends and all of you know, this has been a difficult week at the State Department. I very much appreciate, Minister, the condolences your government expressed to our Embassy in Rabat. And even though that tragedy happened far away in Benghazi, we found a reminder of the deep bonds that connect Morocco to the United States. It was in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco that one of the Americans we lost this week, Ambassador Chris Stevens, fell in love with the region when he served as a Peace Corps volunteer there. That experience set him on a decades-long career of service. So in the memory of fallen friends and colleagues, let us remind ourselves of the many ways in which not just our governments but the people of our two nations have worked together to build a better future.

In many ways, the United States looks to Morocco to be a leader and a model. His Majesty King Mohammed deserves great credit for the work you've undertaken. In fact, after my visit to Rabat earlier this year, I told my team: "We need to start a Strategic Dialogue with Morocco." No country has been a friend of the United States longer than Morocco. You were the first nation to recognize us back in 1777. But we're not satisfied with simply having a friendship that is longstanding. We want one that is dynamic, growing, looking toward the future. So let me highlight a few of the areas we should focus on today.

On political reform, we have all seen remarkable changes taking place across North Africa and the Middle East. I commend Morocco and your government for your efforts to stay ahead of these changes by holding free and fair elections, empowering the elected parliament, taking other steps to ensure that the government reflects the will of the people. Today, our political working group will discuss how the United States can continue to support your efforts to translate commitments into actions. Because as we all know, democracy, real reform, require that people themselves feel the changes in their everyday lives: the courts reformed, the government more open and transparent, universal human rights of all Moroccans – men and women alike – respected.

I'm especially pleased by Morocco's commitments to take on the deeply troubling problem of child marriage. We know that child brides are less likely to get an education, more likely to face life-threatening problems, particularly around child birth and delivery, which not only shortchanges them but can even rob them and their communities of their lives and talents. So we want to encourage the government and civil society to continue their important work together on this issue.

With regard to the Western Sahara, the United States continues to support efforts to find a peaceful, sustainable, mutually agreed-upon solution. U.S. policy toward the Western Sahara has remained consistent for many years. We have made clear that Morocco's autonomy plan is serious, realistic, and

credible, and that it represents a potential approach that could satisfy the aspirations of the people in the Western Sahara to run their own affairs in peace and dignity. We continue to support the negotiations carried out by the United Nations and hope parties can work toward resolution.

With respect to the economy, our second working group will focus on what more can be done to deliver tangible economic benefits. Morocco's economy is relatively healthy, but you face the same problem that is now endemic across the world – unemployment is still too high, especially among young people.

That's why the United States is providing \$1.5 million to support an effort to attract foreign investors, foster local economic development, and combat corruption across the region. And I'm pleased to announce that later this year we will hold a Morocco business development conference here in Washington to connect businesses from both countries.

Today, we should discuss ways to build on all of these efforts by increasing bilateral trade, a particular goal of mine since so much trade from Morocco goes to Europe. I'd like to increase the amount of trade coming to the United States, and also to improve economic integration across North Africa, which could greatly benefit Morocco because of Morocco's stability and Morocco's very strong economic foundation. The greater integration there is, the greater the benefits for Moroccans.

Third, the attack in Benghazi this week reminds us that security remains a vital issue. Through our work together on the Global Counterterrorism Task Force, the United States and Morocco already share crucial information and best practices, and I thank Morocco for hosting a Global Counterterrorism Task Force workshop on threats in the South Atlantic next month.

We are also collaborating through USAID, the Peace Corps, and other agencies to help provide Moroccan youth with alternatives to criminal and extremist organizations. And so we are partnering to help strengthen Morocco's criminal justice system and law enforcement.

There will be a lot to discuss in the meeting today. And let me add, the United States greatly appreciates the constructive role Morocco is playing on the UN Security Council, especially your support for the effort to end the violence and bloodshed in Syria and help to usher in a new democratic future for that country. I commend Morocco for offering to host the next ministerial meeting of the Friends of the Syrian People, and we look forward to continuing to work closely together as close partners even after your term on the Security Council has ended.

Finally, our education and cultural ties are reason for much celebration. This year marks the 30th anniversary of our official program to facilitate academic exchanges and other bonds between us. There are more than 5,000 Moroccan alumni of these programs. Two are with us today – Dr. Benjelloun and Dr. Ouaouicha – and we thank them. But among all our work on this front, from preserving Morocco's historic sites to empowering youth, there's one area I particularly hope we can focus on today and receive your advice and counsel – namely, interfaith dialogue.

In these tense and turbulent times, it's more important than ever for people of different faiths to exchange ideas, to build understanding, to promote religious tolerance. It's one of the great challenges of the 21st century, and it's one that we must address together.

So we have a lot of work to do, Minister, but our friendship runs long and deep, and as the treaty our nations signed in 1786 says, and I quote, "Trusting in God, it will remain permanent." I'm confident that

we will continue to solve problems and produce results that make our nations stronger, more peaceful, more secure, more prosperous, and also contribute to doing the same for the world.

So again, let me welcome you, Minister. It's been a great pleasure for me to get to know you, to work with you, to be your colleague bilaterally, regionally, and globally, and also welcome your distinguished delegation.

Thank you. (Applause.)

FOREIGN MINISTER AL-OTHMANI: I would like to express my sincere condolences of the American people and the government for the death of the U.S. Ambassador in Libya and the other diplomats. We condemn this act of violence and we share the sorrow of their families and the American people.

(Via interpreter) Madam Secretary, honored, distinguished audience, I would like to thank Madam Secretary for the clear positions and frank positions that she expressed today. And these are positions that indicate that you have a balanced and prudent policy. And I would like to confirm that yesterday, with instructions from His Majesty King Mohammed VI, there was a clear message from Morocco issued by the Moroccan Government that condemned the attack that took place on the U.S. Consulate in Libya, and also condemned the killing of diplomats – of American diplomats, innocent diplomats who work – who should be protected because they're ambassadors and diplomats.

Also, once again, would like to reiterate Morocco's clear position against violence and against any confrontation as a way to solve problems and settle conflicts. Morocco has always been – has always stressed peace and security, while also maintaining the positions of each person, but solving problems through dialogue and conviction, but within the framework of peace and stability.

At the same time, I would like to thank Madam Secretary for her clear position vis-a-vis the video that attacks the Prophet and also for her position against this insult, and I would like to say that the Kingdom of Morocco also has the same position. We say all prophets should be respected and should not be attacked or insulted. We respect Prophet Moses and Jesus and Muhammad and all prophets because they are symbols for humanity, for the entire humanity, and insulting them is an insult to millions of human beings who respect them and hold them in high esteem. And any kind of insult would only provoke hate and conflict between people. And we live in a world that is tired of conflict. It's tired of hate. And it needs policies that promote peace and security.

I would also like to extend my sincere appreciation and thanks to Madam Secretary for her special attention and personal attention that she paid to hold this first session of Strategic Dialogue. I am pleased and honored to be here with Madam Secretary in opening this dialogue. And as you indicated, the relationship between Morocco and the U.S. are historic, and they go back to centuries ago, and there are protocols of friendship that go back to the first protocol signed in 1787, and is still in effect and also it's been succeeded by numerous agreements. And since that time, the two countries, Morocco and the U.S., have continued to be partners in several – on several issues and problems within the framework of engagement and direct dialogue, and also within the framework of working to establish the principles of sovereignty and abiding by international legitimacy, and also peaceful resolution to conflict within international law and convention of the UN and also within the framework of respect for human rights.

We have also referred to these issues in the strategic relationship during the latest visit that His Majesty paid to Washington, in which he called for – and I quote – His Majesty said that we should provide the right environment to promote a strategic partnership in the Mediterranean and also that within its European context and our signing of the memorandum of understanding is only a confirmation of this mutual desire for consultation between the two countries. It's also within the framework of renewed partnership in order to exchange opinions and views about issues of priority in our relations and also to better coordinate our positions vis-a-vis international issues of mutual concern.

This diversity and wealth of our relationship will allow us to dedicate today four committees, four working committees, to address political, economic, security, and educational issues between us and also to activate the results and the decisions that would result as a result of these meetings and our distinguished relationship and Morocco's balanced participation in the Mediterranean dialogue for the – for NATO and its active contribution to the UN efforts to maintain peace and – international peace and security, and also mutual cooperation between our two countries within the framework of the Security Coordination Committee makes Morocco a partner – a credible partner – in our Strategic Dialogue with the U.S.

Morocco, as you mentioned – as Madam Secretary mentioned – was in the lead since a decade ago to join, based on a deep conviction, to also engage in a series of daring reform, and these have been crowned with the adoption of a new constitution that dedicates its determination to move forward in building democracy and also establishing the rule of law. The changes in the entire Arab region and also in the North Africa and the – last year reflect the aspirations of their people to democracy and human rights, and also this has dedicated Morocco's conviction to move forward in this direction that it has chosen earlier.

At the political level, I would like to point out or refer to four different portfolios. The first one is Morocco's deep engagement in building the Maghreb Union as a strategic choice that is entrenched in the constitution as a priority for Moroccan foreign policy. And this we seek to achieve in coordination with our partnership in the region by strengthening our mutual relations and also through building a Maghreb – a democratic Maghreb Union, a prosperous one that respects human rights and also its own peoples.

The second issue is the security issue on the – in the Sahel region and the Sahara, and I would like to point out that Morocco is deeply engaged and heavily engaged in working with various partners, whether private nonprofit organizations or even civil society organization, and also countries in the region and international partners to establish peace and security in the Sahara and the Sahel regions using – through the peace and security mechanisms and also using political mechanisms. Therefore, Morocco is attempting to coordinate at the highest level with neighboring countries, and also with West Africa – African nations, and the Maghreb Union because maintaining security in the region is – maintaining also tribal security and the security of the Mediterranean. And this directly impacts international peace and security.

The third issue is the Western Sahara issue. Maghreb – Morocco has bravely submitted a proposal for self-rule, and it considers it to be base for negotiations to reach a final agreement to this long-lasting conflict.

And I would like to extend to you, Madam Secretary, my deepest thanks for your clear position that you repeatedly reiterated, and you once again confirmed it today, considering the self-rule solution to be a

realistic solution and a serious one. And Morocco is open to implement UN resolutions in participating with sincere credibility in negotiations that would lead to such a final resolution.

Finally, the Syrian problem. You notice that Madam Secretary also noted that Morocco's direct involvement and its sincere commitment to the partnership and also coordination with various parts and locally and internationally to put an end to this nightmare – to this horrific nightmare that the Syrian people – our brotherly Syrian people is facing. And we are committed to continue on this path of cooperation to put an end to the violence that the Syrian people are experiencing. And in this regard, Morocco will be hosting the upcoming meeting for the Friends of Syria meetings next October, and I wish that you would honor us with your participation.

The Strategic Dialogue that brings us together today is not just political and not just economic. Morocco is like any other countries in the region, has economic problems, and our major partners in Europe are also facing recessions, and this affects Morocco directly. For that reason, we are delighted to have this dialogue today on economic issues so that we can deepen our economic cooperation between the two countries and also attract more American investments in Morocco. And we would like to learn what concerns U.S. investors have so that we can address them and discuss them, and also find ways to attract these investments to Morocco.

We also would like to have a Free Trade Agreement between the two countries – more successful and more balanced, and this could also – so that it can open avenues for Morocco to benefit from it. As I said before, Morocco is committed to effectively contribute to the entire region to maintain peace and security, and therefore a discussion of issues related to the economic problems is very vital to this.

Finally, we have the educational discussions and also a dialogue between civilizations. And then this has been led by His Majesty, as Prince of the Faithful, and he's been sponsoring dialogue between various cultures. And Morocco has always been a meeting place for all civilizations, and we are very delighted to be part of this discussion as well.

Giving us today, the – today marking the onset of this U.S.-Moroccan dialogue that we started today with the signing of Memorandum of Understanding is a very important step in our mutual relationship, and it's a very important turning point in our strategic relationship, and reflects the determination of His Majesty and also President – Morocco – President Obama, to further enhance and development this relationship. And we will do our utmost best to enrich the strategic relationship for the interests – best interests of all – both our people.

And you will find in Morocco a credible partner, and thank you very much. (Applause.)

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