

# American

## NEWS & VIEWS

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U.S. Sees Regional Dynamic in Mideast Protests .....	1
Corporate Reputation Matters, Experts Say.....	1
Inauguration of Afghan Parliament a “Significant Milestone” .....	3
Beauty and Censorship Show in Festivals Celebrating Iranian Films.....	3

## U.S. Sees Regional Dynamic in Mideast Protests

By Stephen Kaufman  
Staff Writer

Washington — The Obama administration says there is a regional dynamic under way in the Middle East and North Africa as younger populations seeking better opportunities are voicing their protests in the streets, and it urges governments in the region to “actively respond” to the concerns of the protesters.

The January 14 ouster of former Tunisian President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali has been watched across the region, State Department spokesman Philip J. Crowley said January 27, and it is “an important moment” for governments to “take advantage of this opportunity to expand their dialogue with their populations and respond to the aspirations of their people.”

In the wake of Tunisia’s political changes, anti-government protests also have erupted in Egypt and Yemen. Crowley said people across the region are drawing lessons from Tunisia’s example.

“It has created an opportunity. It’s an opportunity that presents itself in Egypt. It’s an opportunity that presents itself in Yemen. And ... we believe that governments need to take advantage of this opportunity,” he said.

The United States is “giving Egypt and other countries our best advice,” but “it’s not up to us to determine who in the future will lead the people of Egypt. That is a choice for the people of Egypt,” he said.

Crowley urged calm, saying the changes protesters seek, such as credible and peaceful elections in Tunisia, require “a peaceful environment.” He said the United States is looking for ways to help the Tunisian people “build a credible process” and have the “opportunity to influence their future.”

The unrest reinforces Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton’s January 13 message to the Forum of the Future in Qatar where she highlighted the growing majority of young people in the Middle East who are facing diminished job and economic opportunities, Crowley said.

Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and other countries in the region “face similar demographic challenges — young populations, highly educated, very motivated, looking for jobs, looking for opportunities, and quite honestly, frustrated by, depending on the country, what they see as a lack of opportunity,” he said.

The “status quo in the Middle East and North Africa is

not sustainable,” and it is important for countries in the region to “reform and evolve,” he said.

“We want to see political, economic and social reform that opens up the opportunity for Egyptian people, just as the people of other countries, to more significantly influence who will lead their country in the future and the direction of that country and the opportunities generated in that country,” Crowley said.

Even though the United States clearly is encouraging reforms, “what the government does and how they do it and on what timeline, that is a matter ... for the government to work with its own population,” he said.

“What happens going forward will be something that develops indigenously, country by country,” he said.

In his January 25 State of the Union address, President Obama said the protests in Tunisia proved to be “more powerful than the writ of a dictator,” and said the United States “stands with the people of Tunisia, and supports the democratic aspirations of all people.”

Secretary of State Clinton said January 26 that her message to Arab government, civil society and business leaders in Qatar was that “people across the Middle East, like people everywhere, are seeking a chance to contribute and have a role in the decisions that affect their lives.”

She echoed the president’s support for the democratic aspirations of people everywhere.

“The United States supports the aspirations of all people for greater freedom, for self-government, for the rights to express themselves, to associate and assemble, to be part of the full, inclusive functioning of their society,” she said.

## Corporate Reputation Matters, Experts Say

By Andrzej S Zwanecki  
Staff Writer

Washington — A few years back, David Frishkorn had to deal with what he calls “perceived accounting shenanigans.”

His employer’s business model was based on its ability to borrow money at a low cost, an ability that depended on its good reputation. Unfavorable perception caused the company’s low-cost borrowing to evaporate almost immediately. Frishkorn and other managers cut costs to arrest financial losses and then changed company policies to align them with corporate values and restore credibility in the long term.

“Reputation takes years to build and seconds to destroy,” said Frishkorn, now the vice president and chief

compliance officer at Converse Technology Inc.

#### ALL EYES ON CORPORATIONS

Many companies know they needed to maintain a good reputation to conduct or improve business. But rarely have they face such a serious reputational challenge as financial and related industries do today, according to experts.

Repairing Wall Street's reputation, for instance, will be harder than it would have been 10 or 15 years ago: More is required of companies if they are to be highly regarded. Those involved with a company – employees, customers, local communities, activists and regulators – have agendas ranging from environmental protection to women's rights, said Leslie Gaines-Ross, chief reputation strategist at Weber Shandwick, an international public relations company.

Moreover, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) exert more influence in the marketplace than ever, she said, and, thanks to the Internet and mobile devices, NGOs are able to watch companies closely and mobilize quickly for action.

"It's a new world," Gaines-Ross said. "You cannot hide behind your company's walls anymore."

Corporations are under scrutiny, whether they do business in the United States, India, Brazil or anywhere else in the world, experts say.

Public trust and transparency are as important to corporate reputation as the quality of products and services, according to an international survey by Edelman, a global public relations firm.

Collaborating or partnering with NGOs often makes sense because those groups – generally more respected than corporations – can enhance corporate credibility and help business leaders figure out the best ways of exercising corporate responsibility, said Paul Argenti, a business professor at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire.

For example, in the mid-2000s, fast-food restaurant chain McDonald's Corporation consulted a U.S. environmental group before it introduced new, environmentally friendly packaging. Agribusiness and financial services company Cargill Inc. worked with a similar group to meet anti-deforestation requirements in Brazil.

#### REPUTATION GOES TO CORPORATE HEADS

John Mahon, a business professor at the University of Maine, compares corporate reputation to a bottle of good

wine: "You don't appreciate it until you taste it."

In other words, many businesses do well for some time without paying attention to their reputation, Mahon said. But they do not know how much better they could do, if they cared. When a crisis comes, "the lack of investment in reputation may come around and hurt them," he said.

Businesses range from those that do not put much effort in building their reputations to those that view reputations as a competitive advantage, according to Argenti.

Some research indicates companies with solid reputations can engender conditions that reinforce their reputations: They are more likely to have stronger financial performance, attract and retain good workers, and develop the ability to expand.

For example, Lakshmi Mittal, an expatriate Indian based in London, has turned an obscure Indian company Mittal Steel into ArcelorMittal, a global steelmaking empire, mostly thanks to good corporate reputation. Mittal Steel has acquired assets in different countries based on the owner's reputation as "a doctor of sick steel mills." In addition, as reputation is a reflection of trustworthiness, customers and other involved entities tend to be more forgiving of a reputable company when it blunders, according to Mahon.

Conversely, bad reputation can hurt business. Large, publicly traded companies can have any hint of scandal depress their share prices, but small businesses are not exempt from such difficulties, experts say. For example, in 2008, when the owner of Murky Coffee – a popular coffee bar in Arlington, Virginia – engaged in a nasty quarrel with a customer, the customer took his case to the Internet. The coffee bar soon lost some of its luster among local coffee aficionados.

Still, for small and large businesses alike, the exact cost of indifference to reputation or of significant business blunders is difficult to measure, according to Argenti. But clearly a tarnished reputation can lead to negative publicity, decline of share price or market share, loss of revenue, litigation, departure of valued employees or stricter regulation of the industry, he said.

Senior management needs to actively manage reputational risk, according to experts. First of all, that means planning in advance possible responses to challenges, Argenti said.

When a reputational crisis erupts, a company should gather information, communicate quickly with affected entities and, in general, act in a credible and transparent way, he said. Hiding facts, stalling, defending

indefensible actions or relying entirely on public relations professionals can make a bad situation worse, experts say.

“You cannot just pretend that you care about your reputation,” said Gaines-Ross of Weber Shandwick. “You have to make it true and genuine because people will find out that you’re not doing what you say you’re doing.”

### **Inauguration of Afghan Parliament a “Significant Milestone”**

Washington – The Obama administration says the opening of Afghanistan’s parliament is “a significant milestone” for the country’s democracy and its people and that constructive debate and cooperation between President Hamid Karzai and the Afghan legislature demonstrate their commitment to ensuring that the will of constituents is carried out and “democratic principles are prioritized.”

The Afghan parliament opened on January 26 in Kabul.

“The seating of parliament is a significant milestone in the progression of Afghanistan’s democracy and an extremely important moment for Afghans who bravely cast their votes last September,” National Security Council spokesman Mike Hammer said in a January 26 statement.

The elections, which were held in September 2010, were the first Afghan-led voting since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Approximately 5 million voters participated to elect members to the Wolesi Jerga, Afghanistan’s 249-member lower house of parliament.

Saying the Obama administration welcomes the inauguration of the parliament, Hammer said the United States “joins the Afghan people in celebrating today’s achievement and we encourage the Afghans to begin an inclusive dialogue on electoral reform.”

State Department spokesman Philip J. Crowley commended Afghan voters “who have steadfastly and courageously supported peace and democracy despite tremendous challenges,” in a January 26 statement.

“We look forward to supporting the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan as the executive, legislative, and judicial branches work together to advance the priorities of the Afghan people,” Crowley said.

### **Beauty and Censorship Show in Festivals Celebrating Iranian Films**

By Jeff Baron  
Staff Writer

Washington – The lights are going down, and the images of Iran are going up at museums in several U.S. cities as Americans take another look at what Iranian filmmakers have to say about that country.

“You see a lot of films this year that take issue with the restrictions on what artists are allowed to do,” said Carter Long, the film curator at the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Boston, which has begun the 17th annual edition of the Boston Festival of Films from Iran. Other such festivals are running this winter in Washington, Houston, Atlanta, Los Angeles and Honolulu.

That’s not to suggest that his choice of films was a political statement, Long said. “I wouldn’t program with political considerations. Here at the MFA, it’s all about the art of the film,” he said.

Nor did he set out to focus attention on two Iranian directors, Jafar Panahi and Mohammad Rasoulof, who were sentenced in December 2010 to six years in prison by an Iranian court on charges of working against Iran’s ruling system. But Long chose to close Boston’s festival with a film directed by Rasoulof and edited by Panahi called *The White Meadows*, the allegorical tale of a man who travels to isolated islands to collect the tears of their residents.

“It’s very likely my favorite movie that I’ve seen in 2010. It’s just beautiful,” he said. “It’s a great sort of surrealist or magical-realism approach to filmmaking, which I really get a kick out of, and it’s really affecting at the same time: It’s a really powerful film about personal subjectivity.”

At least one movie, *My Tehran for Sale*, is showing at several festivals accompanied by its director, poet and first-time filmmaker, Granaz Moussavi. It tells the tale of a young actress who must decide whether to leave Iran for Australia to pursue her art. Long said that Moussavi, who lives in Australia, managed to gain Iranian government approval to shoot her film in Tehran.

“She had some really clever ways of bringing in difficult subjects and topics – and depictions of those subjects and topics – while working within the system. It’s just fascinating,” Long said.

In Washington, film curator Tom Vick said he noticed something of a trend as he tried to decide which movies to pick for the 15th annual Iranian Film Festival at the Smithsonian Institution’s Sackler and Freer Galleries.

"A lot of Iranian filmmakers are being influenced by other parts of the world now. I mean, it used to be everyone was kind of imitating Abbas Kiarostami and [Mohsen] Makhmalbaf and making these very quiet, kind of minimal films," Vick said. "You definitely see a different kind of aesthetic going on."

Filmmakers also approached different topics, he said. The Washington festival includes *Salve*, which depicts drug use and other social problems in Tehran through the story of a woman trying to protect her rebellious granddaughter.

"It's the first year I've really seen a lot of these films that are going away from what we expect Iranian films to kind of look and sound like," Vick said. "And I think that may also be sort of the energy from the protests and the elections [of 2009]. I mean, that need to protest and say something and get news out, it's sort of leaking out in the films as well."

Long offered a similar assessment of how the atmosphere in Iran might be affecting its movies. "To a certain extent, limitations and restrictions and difficult social and cultural climates can, in some cases, produce the best art, and we may see that exemplified in films from Iran coming up," he said. "It's certainly, I would say, the case with Mohammad Rasoulof's film, *The White Meadows*. I think it's an absolutely beautiful film that came out of very, very trying circumstances."

That doesn't mean that the movies are all serious or bleak. *There's Nothing Behind the Door*, which is showing in Boston, is something of a crime caper, more of a commercial film than an artistic one and "definitely enjoyable," Long said.

And both Boston and Washington are featuring the comedies *Frontier Blues* and *Please Do Not Disturb*. *Frontier Blues*, which follows four men's lives in a village in Iranian Turkmenistan, is absurdist and subtle, with very dry wit, Vick said. "If you like that style of humor, you'll like it, and if you hate that kind of humor, you'll absolutely despise it," he said.

*Please Do Not Disturb* is more likely to be broadly popular with Americans, Vick said. "I found it quite funny. It's very engaging," he said. "Our curator of Islamic art is always challenging me to find an Iranian comedy — she's always complaining about how [the films are] always so dreary. So this is my comedy."

Long, Vick and Marian Luntz of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, work with one another on their Iranian film festivals, though the programs are not identical. The independent Ilex Foundation, which promotes the study of cultures from the Mediterranean and Near East, helps

support the programs.

"It's tough business putting on an Iranian film festival, you know," Long said. "It's not easy to find the material sometimes, and then to secure the rights to screen it can be equally difficult."

The response, though, is easy to predict: These are the most popular film festivals at the museums every year.

"It's a thrill every year, and yeah, we get a great audience," Long said. "There are quite a few people of Iranian descent — I mean, there's the cultural interest and the heritage interest — but there is a lot of interest, I think, in American film buffs' minds in Iranian cinema, going back to the '90s."

Vick said that Washington, as a city with a large international population, is fertile ground for international films, but that the Iranian festival stands out.

"It's our most popular annual series, and we get a really good turnout from the Iranian community, which is really great," he said. "It's really gratifying to be able to reach out to these different communities in the city. They want to see not only just films from Iran, but I think they want to see Iran and they want to get together and sort of celebrate this culture."

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