

STATE DEPARTMENT LIVE
WITH DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR NEAR EASTERN AFFAIRS TAMARA
WITTES

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MS. JENSEN: Good afternoon. Welcome to State Department Live, the State Department's interactive online video platform for engaging international media. I'd like to welcome our participants from all over the world. Today we'll be speaking with Tamara Wittes, our deputy assistant secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Bureau, and we'll be discussing the Arab Spring and the uprisings in the Middle East.

I would like to take this opportunity to tell you, you are welcome to start asking your questions in the lower left-hand portion of your screen. And if you would like to continue this conversation after today's program, you can follow us on Twitter at @state, @USAbilAraby, @USAenFrancais, @USAdarFarsi, and @USMEPI. And with that, I will turn it over to Tamara Wittes. Thank you for joining us today.

MS. WITTES: Thank you so much. This is such a great opportunity for me to engage directly with all of you out in the region, to hear your questions, and to be able to respond directly and have a bit of a conversation. So even though I don't get to travel as frequently as I might like out to the Arab world, it's a great chance for us to interact virtually. I want to thank you very much for joining us.

We are here after a really historic week in what has been an incredibly historic year in the Middle East with the declaration of the liberation in Libya and the tremendous success of the Arab Spring's first free, democratic elections in Tunisia a week ago Sunday. There is a long road for these countries in transition as they continue to move toward democracy. We're committed to standing with them as they move down that road and to really ensuring that what's at the heart of these events – the demands of citizens for dignity, for opportunity, for freedom – are at the heart of our response as well and to be guided by them.

So with that, let me open it up, and I look forward to your questions.

MS. JENSEN: Our first question comes from the *Kuwait Times*: I think there is a need for any new powers to be educated on how to reserve all the achievements and try to implement democratic polities. The question here is how to do so and how to help new powers – how to help new power to be democratic and reserve human rights.

MS. WITTES: This is a fantastic point, and thank you for bringing it up. As I think the Kuwaiti experience demonstrates, where you've had a parliamentary system for a number of years now and very open debate inside Kuwait, but it doesn't come automatically. The skills inherent to democratic politics are something that everyone needs to learn and every society is constantly seeking to perfect. Even here in the United States, we're constantly looking at our democratic system and what improvements we need to make to ensure that it really fulfills what citizens are looking for. So I think that this is something every democratic society faces.

We try to support democratic growth in the countries in the Middle East that are in transition, as we do around the world in a variety of ways. But I think that one of the most important ways that we can do that is by bringing those newly emerging democracies together with other democratic societies, whether they're from Europe, the Western Hemisphere, Southeast Asia. The community of democracies is very diverse, and every democracy has its own experiences to offer.

So the Polish Government, for example, invited Tunisians and Egyptians and Libyans to come and observe their recent parliamentary elections. And facilitating those kinds of connections, I think is one of the ways that we can help cultivate quality democracy globally.

MS. JENSEN: Our next question comes from Mohamed Al-Bishi (ph): What's your comment on the analysis which says U.S. intelligence failed to anticipate and track the Arab Spring?

MS. WITTES: Speaking as somebody who's studied the region for my whole career, I think that many of us who have spent time in the region and have followed the politics of the Arab world understood that there were some deep underlying developments in the region that were creating pressures for change. And those include the demography, the fact that more than half the Arab world are young people under the age of 30; the developments in economics or, to be frank, the stagnation and concerns about corruption in many places; and then changes also in the information environment, the media environment, the fact that people had more access to information about what was going on in other countries so that they could compare their situations to others and really look at what it was they wanted to achieve.

All of these changes have been building for years, for a decade or more. And Secretary Clinton, in fact, made note of these changes just under a year ago, last January, before Ben Ali left Tunisia, before what became known as the Arab Spring really got underway. She said to Arab leaders gathered in Doha at the G-8 BMENA Forum for the Future that they needed to respond to the aspirations of their own citizens for change, and without that they would not be able to build strong foundations for their societies and for the region into the future.

So I think that these trends have been there for a lot of people to see, and certainly the debate on democratic reform in the region has been ongoing for some time. That, to me, says that the events of this year, dramatic as they are, have very deep causes. And that also means that the pressures for change we see are not going away anytime soon. And even if it takes some time for these events to play out, one way or another, I think we see these pressures evident in every society.

MS. JENSEN: Our next question comes from Nasser Arabi (ph) from *Ahram Weekly* in Yemen: Political tyranny and corruption led to the current popular uprising in Yemen, but this uprising is now being exploited by traditional tribal and religious forces that may repeat the same political tyranny and corruption and maybe even worse. What would the U.S. government do to help Yemenis who want real democracy and not just changing the regime with a worse one?

MS. WITTES: I think anytime there is an opening in society, there are going to be those who try and come in to work that change on behalf of their own interests. That's politics. But the Yemeni people are determined, it seems to me, and they've demonstrated that determination through months and months of peaceful demonstrations, calling for political transition and calling for democracy in Yemen. To me, it's the Yemeni people who will be the guarantors that in any political transition they will get the change they seek. The – it's going to be Yemeni people who need to be able to hold their new leaders accountable for the promises that they've made.

Now in order to do that, you need good democratic rules, good institutions, and you need an environment in which rights are respected so that Yemeni citizens can speak freely about what's going on and can hold their government to account. I think in all the work that the United States has tried to do diplomatically with others in the international community to promote a political transition in Yemen, we have held in mind these aspirations of the Yemeni people, but ultimately it will be Yemeni citizens who are going to have to enforce those expectations on their new leaders.

MS. JENSEN: Our next question comes Abhishek Bhaya (ph) from Muscat Daily: The United States has cut off funding from UNESCO after the UN agency admitted Palestine as a full member. Why is the U.S. not adhering to the principles of democracy when an overwhelming number of nations have voted in favor of the Palestinian membership?

MS. WITTES: Thank you for that question. I think it's very important to understand that the United States, along with a very wide majority in the international community and along with countries in the region and Israelis and Palestinians, all of us agree on the core goal, which is a two-state solution where Israel and Palestine live side by side in dignity and sovereignty and peace. The question is how do we get to that goal?

It's been our view that trying to achieve symbolic gains in international institutions is not going to get Palestinians any closer to their goal of sovereignty and statehood. This is a symbolic move at UNESCO. It doesn't make a difference to the lives of any Palestinians on the ground. What we've been focused on in our own work has been bringing the Israelis and Palestinians back to the negotiating table, where they can settle the remaining issues between them and achieve that negotiated two-state solution that is the only path to lasting stability and peace for both peoples, the peace that they both so richly deserve.

So the vote at UNESCO yesterday, in our view, was unfortunate and a diversion in many ways from the real work that need to get done at the negotiating table.

MS. JENSEN: This is another one from Abhishek Bhaya (ph): Many nations, including the BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa – have accused NATO of exceeding the UN mandate in Libya. Subsequently, the BRICS have also blocked the UN resolution against Syria, which was being strongly pushed by the U.S. and its Western allies. What do you think a substantial part of the world – why do you think a substantial part of the world do not agree with the West on its policies in the Middle East?

MS. WITTES: I would look at the Libya situation in its specific context. I think what you had there was an uprising that began peacefully, that was met with intense violence from Qadhafi's government and, faced with that brutality, began to respond to defend the citizens of Libya. Those who were engaged in that uprising asked for international protection to defend their own citizens. The Arab League voted for international intervention to protect civilians, and then the UN Security Council passed a resolution calling for measures by the international community to protect civilians.

The NATO mission was restricted to that mission and that goal. That's what it was about. It was about preventing Qadhafi and his military forces from carrying out what surely would have been massacres against their own citizens. I believe NATO succeeded in that mission, and I believe the Libyan people on the ground succeeded in liberating their own country with the support and protection provided by that NATO mission. That is a set of policies that I believe had very wide support in the international community, and you see today the wide number of countries who are welcoming the emergence of a new, free Libya and working to support it as it moves toward democracy.

MS. JENSEN: Our next question comes from Sami al-Duwani (ph) from KUNA Kuwait: What role do you expect from surrounding regional countries like Kuwait in organizations like the Gulf Cooperation Council in the time to come?

MS. WITTES: Great question from Kuwait. In fact, I think Kuwait has a special role to play this year in working together with its brother countries all around the region, both at the level of government and at the level of civil society to talk about the Arab Spring, to talk about these demands for change, and how governments can respond.

Why does Kuwait have a special role? Because this year Kuwait will be hosting the Forum for the Future, which is an annual meeting of the G-8 governments and the governments from the region, along with civil society organizations from all across the Middle East. It's an annual opportunity for government and citizens to dialogue together about the need for reform, about setting priorities, and about how to advance the process together, working as partners.

So I'm delighted that Kuwait will be hosting that meeting. We look forward to participating, and I hope to see you there in a few weeks.

MS. JENSEN: Our next question comes from Abhishek Bhaya (ph) again: In Tunisia, the polls have put the hardline Ennahada in a position of power. Egypt has been marred by sectarian and religious violence. Do you think that there's a danger of hardline political groups with extremist views benefitting in the ensuing chaos in the nations facing the so-called Arab Spring?

MS. WITTES: I think that's a very important question to ask. There's no doubt that political transitions are uncertain, and we have seen at previous periods of history that revolutions that began with great promise, like the Iranian revolution for example, were hijacked by those with an extreme agenda, who then pushed others out of the political sphere and began trampling on democratic rights and values. All of us who care about the fate of the region and the fate of these

new democracies need to pay attention and do what we can to try and ensure that the aspirations of citizens are respected in the way these transitions move forward.

What does that mean? That means that the political marketplace needs to be open. People should be able to express their ideas freely, but if you want to be an actor in democratic politics, there are some core principles to which you must adhere. You have to commit yourself to not using violence to achieve your political goals, to working peacefully through the system. You have to commit yourself to the democratic rules of the game, whether you win or whether you lose. And you have to commit yourself to treating all citizens of the state equally – equality under the law, a core principle of democracy. So I think these are essential elements for any new political actor who wants to participate in the democratic system.

Those are certainly the ideas that we bring into our conversations with all of these new political actors, and we ask: What is your stance on these issues? How can you demonstrate to the citizens that you're really going to fulfill their aspirations for democracy? Ultimately, it's going to be the citizens of these states who are going to shape their own future and decide whether these new political parties win or lose at the polls. But the election itself is not the end of democratic development. In many ways, it's just the beginning. And it's how these political actors play their roles in accordance with democratic principles that will ultimately demonstrate whether they can play a constructive role in democratic politics.

MS. JENSEN: I'd just like to remind you that if you would like to continue this conversation after today's program, you can do so on Twitter, @USMEPI, which is the Middle East Partnership Initiative, or you can do it on USAdarFarsi or USAenFrancais or USAbilAraby.

Our next question comes from Mustafa Al Arab from CNN Arabic: The Iranian foreign minister is planning for a visit soon to Libya and Tunisia, and Tehran is trying to rebuild relationships with Egypt while the U.S. is pulling troops from Iraq. How do you see the new balance of power in the region, specifically if the moderate Islamic parties in these Arab Spring countries decided to build relationships with Tehran?

MR. WITTES: In many ways, I think that the young people who drove the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and Libya have demonstrated more clearly than I think anything else could the hypocrisy behind Iranian policy in the region. They have said that they're not waiting for anyone else to give them their turn to participate; they're demanding their right to participate. They're demanding rights for themselves and their fellow citizens. And they're also rejecting the notion that the only way to achieve change in the region is through some unending confrontation with outside powers.

They're doing it for themselves. They're taking ownership over their own future. To me, that's a tremendously positive development. And it's also, in my view, I think, a real response to others in the region who preach confrontation as the only path to change. So I think that Tunisians, Egyptians, and Libyans are taking control of their own fate. They're going to make their own decisions about the relationships they want to have in the region.

I think that Tunisians, Egyptians, and Libyans also have clear priorities that relate to their own situation at home. They want equal opportunities in the economy, they want dignity and rights from their government, they want a government that's accountable to them and that operates transparently. And they want peace and stability in their neighborhood so that they can benefit economically and have the future that they desire. Iran's role in the region has not advanced those goals. Iran has been a destabilizing actor and an actor that is provoking tension rather than stability and opportunity. So to me, I think that these citizens and these countries are going to have to look at where their interests lie.

MS. JENSEN: Our next question comes from the Middle East post in Palestine. Bear with me. It's long: The Quartet attempts to bring both the Israelis and the Palestinians to the negotiation table, and it failed until this moment. The current Israeli leadership threatens to build hundreds of new settlements in the West Bank as a reaction to the UNESCO recognition of Palestine, while the Palestinian leadership is determined to continue its effort in diplomatic channels to gain a global recognition of the Palestinian state. Palestinians see, in their efforts, a part of the Arab Spring. The U.S. refuses the UN bid for a Palestinian state and is not succeeding in bringing the two sides to the negotiation table again. What would be the American reaction and policy, especially that the Palestinians stated today that they will apply for other tens of UN organizations to recognize them while Israel is threatening to cut relations with the PA?

MR. WITTES: Okay. Well, I think you've captured a lot of the recent developments in your question, and so let me say a couple of things in response. Number one, as you noted, we are very focused – the United States – working with the Quartet on trying to get the two parties back to direct talks. But we're not only doing that in the interim. We're engaged in discussions separately with the Israelis and with the Palestinians on a couple of core issues – on security and on land, and both parties are bringing their proposals to us, and we're sharing information back and forth. So we're engaged in indirect negotiations.

We think that's very important to try and advance this process, because it's only through working through these very difficult, very painful issues that Palestinians will get the self-determination that they are seeking and that they deserve. And you noted that in that sense, the Palestinian quest for statehood is a part of the Arab Spring because it's about self-determination, and I think you're right. President Obama spoke to this in May when he laid out his principles for a durable peace between Israelis and Palestinians, and recognizing that Palestinian self-determination is a part of our regional picture, and that Palestinians need to get to statehood.

I think it's important, though, to recognize that these moves at the United Nations are not, in fact, bringing Palestinians closer to the day when they can exercise real self-determination and sovereignty over their lives in an independent state. These are symbolic moves. They do not change the situation on the ground. They do not alter the equation between the parties. What's needed to do that are negotiations, and that's why our efforts are focused on that goal.

MS. JENSEN: Our next question comes from *Jane's Defense Weekly*: Policy-wise, is it possible to extract a model for NATO's future operations based on its missions in Libya, where only a few allies carried out the bulk of the burden? Or does the current financial crisis and

defense spending trend of most of the 28 allies suggest that NATO is fated to patch together only in ad hoc groups of allies well into the future?

MR. WITTES: Wow. That's a very important strategic question and I am not a NATO expert. But what I'll say is that NATO is an alliance of strong partners, each of whom brings their own unique resources to the table. I think that in a number of NATO operations, not only in Libya but elsewhere in the world, you've seen significant sharing of burdens among the various allies in different ways, dependent on the situation and the mission at hand.

So I think that NATO really is a group of peers who each bring their own unique capacities to bear, and we take it case by case.

MS. JENSEN: Our next question is: What is the U.S. involvement in countries of the Arab Spring presently? Is the U.S. funding political parties or organizations? And how does the U.S. decide what groups or projects to fund?

MS. WITTES: Thank you so much for asking this question. I think it's important that I make something very clear. It is not U.S. policy to fund any political party, not in the Arab world and not anywhere else in the world. In fact, it's against our policy to fund political parties.

What we do in our efforts to support democratic development are to provide training and assistance on a nonpartisan basis to political parties, political candidates, campaign managers, who want to learn how they can be more effective in the electoral process. But we provide that assistance in a nonpartisan way through NGOs that open their programs to all parties that reject violence and embrace the democratic process. That's our policy. We are very interested in promoting a quality democratic process. We are not pushing for a particular outcome.

MS. JENSEN: Our next question comes from Hallah Mohamed (ph) from Iraq: Do you know – or do not you think the United States that the security situation in Iraq is not suitable for Iraq not able to stay alone now? Did you get the gist of that?

MS. WITTES: As I understand the question, you're asking about the security situation in Iraq and the possible consequences of our decision to withdraw our forces by the end of the year in line with the agreement that we have with the Iraqi Government and the discussions that we've been having with them.

In that decision, as we've said from the outset, we are guided and we will be guided by the wishes of the Iraqi Government and the Iraqi people. We made a commitment in that agreement with the Iraqi Government a few years ago to withdraw our forces by the end of this year, and we are fulfilling the terms of that agreement.

That does not mean that Iraq is on its own. Iraq has friends and partners around the region and around the world, and the United States will remain a close friend of Iraq and an important partner, I hope, with the Iraqi people and the Iraqi Government in continuing to help Iraq build its democracy, to help Iraq play the important role in the region that we know it will continue to play, and to develop all the institutions it needs to bring security and services to its citizens.

So we will be there, but we will not be there with military boots on the ground. We're going to have a civilian partnership with Iraq. And to us, this is a very exciting opportunity to have a relationship with Iraq, with the government and the people, much more like the relationship we have with other governments around the region and around the world.

MS. JENSEN: We have time for two more questions. The next one is: What is the U.S. doing about countries where the regimes are not listening to the demands of significant numbers of people, namely Syria?

MS. WITTES: I think that all of us watching what's been taking place in Syria in these months since March are tremendously impressed and inspired by the determination of the Syrian citizens maintaining their demands for freedom in the face of incredible brutality at the hands of their own government. It is incredibly distressing. It's also dangerous. The actions of the Syrian Government in responding to its citizens legitimate demands with violence instead of with change, these actions are destabilizing not only for Syria but for its neighbors and for the region.

And that's why we think it is absolutely imperative that the international community as a whole continue to work together to increase pressure on the Syrian Government to make clear to Bashar Asad the negative consequences of the choices he's making, and hopefully to turn them in a different direction.

We know that for the Syrian people, there is no going back. And we know that even if Bashar Asad is working to resist change, change is coming to Syria. We would like to see that change come as peacefully as possible, and we would like to see the Syrian people have the opportunity to exercise their voice and to build the democratic future that they are demanding.

MS. JENSEN: All right, this is our last question: What important things would you like to see countries doing once they have ridded themselves of the dictator and want to start a democracy?

MS. WITTES: I think that the most important thing for citizens in these emerging democracies is that they have taken ownership over their future and they're not letting anyone else make decisions for them. And so this is exciting and it's also what needs to be preserved. The Tunisians, Egyptians, and Libyans, the citizens themselves, are the ones who are making decisions about their future.

In Tunisia, the elections last week, I think demonstrated this wonderfully, that upwards of 70 percent of Tunisians went out to vote, in some places more than 90 percent, to choose the representatives who will draft their new constitution for a democratic Tunisia. The process still has a long way to go, and so working through Tunisia's new constituent assembly, working through the new interim government, and also working through civil society organizations, Tunisian citizens need to stay involved. They need to stay vigilant. They need to maintain that sense of ownership over their own democracy so that they can shape the process as it goes forward.

We seek to support them in doing that. We're providing support to Tunisian civil society. We're providing technical assistance to the new Tunisian constituent assembly, and we are looking forward to working with the government and the people going forward. But it's going to be the citizens themselves who determine their future.

MS. JENSEN: All right. Well, thank you for taking the time to speak with us today, and thank you for joining us on State Department Live. I know there were a lot of additional questions in the queue, and we are going to work really hard to making sure that we get an answer to all of those questions.

I also want to let you know that this is officially the very last State Department Live. We are re-branding and coming back as [Live@State](#), so please stay tuned. We will have a fancier set and a new name, so please stay tuned. And if you would like to continue this conversation on the Arab Spring, please make sure you can follow us on Twitter at @state – that's the main State Department Twitter feed – or @USAbilAraby, USAdarFarsi, USAenFrancais. And if you would like to follow the Middle East Partnership Initiative, you can do so on @USMEPI. Thanks for joining us today.

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