

INTERNATIONAL SECURITY / MIDDLE EAST UPDATE
April 17 - 24, 2013

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1. [Hagel Reaffirms U.S. Commitment to Egypt's Emerging Democracy](#) (04-24-2013)

By Cheryl Pellerin
American Forces Press Service

CAIRO, April 24, 2013 – On the fourth day of his inaugural trip to the Middle East, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel spent time here today with Egypt's top government and defense officials, reaffirming U.S. support for that country's fledgling democracy.

The trip, which began April 20 and will end April 26, so far has taken the secretary to Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. On his final full day in the region, Hagel will visit his counterpart in the United Arab Emirates to discuss common interests.

This morning aboard his military aircraft as it approached Cairo, Hagel told his staff that he had wanted to visit Egypt as soon as possible into his tenure as secretary of defense, a senior defense official said.

"I wanted to stop in Egypt to reaffirm American commitment to Egypt's emerging democracy and encourage the democratic and economic reforms that are under way," the secretary told reporters during a briefing here today.

"Egypt's been an important partner to the United States for many years and I wanted to get acquainted with the new president," he added. "I did not know him but I knew many of the military

leaders, so today was the day to get acquainted and get reacquainted and reaffirm America's commitment to this emerging democracy.”

Hagel's visit here began with a tea ceremony during which he was welcomed by Maj. Gen. Mohammed Zamaloo, the Egyptian Central Military Zone chief of staff. Afterward, at the Ministry of Defense, Hagel met with Defense Minister Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, who hosted an official lunch.

According to a senior defense official, al-Sisi gave Hagel a warm reception and expressed condolences for the Boston bomb attacks and a deadly Texas fertilizer plant accident that occurred during the same week.

During their meeting, Hagel reaffirmed the importance of strong U.S.-Egyptian military ties. He also expressed U.S. support for political and democratic reforms in Egypt and encouraged them to continue for several reasons, including stability in Egypt and the region. The secretary commended the Egyptian military for the responsible role it has played during a difficult transition period in the country.

Al-Sisi said that Egypt understands and takes responsibility for security throughout the country, including Egypt's borders, and the two men exchanged views on Syria, Iran and other regional security matters, the defense official said.

“It is not easy. This is a difficult part of the world,” Hagel said of Egypt and the region. “This is a large country, an important country. They are undertaking the right course of action -- human dignity and freedom, democratic norms and governance. We are committed to helping any nation that does that.”

Before visiting the presidential palace to meet Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, Hagel took the time to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

The memorial is sited along a major thoroughfare, according to a pool report, and has a 73-meter-tall pyramid sculpture-monument. Beneath are two tombs.

Then-Egyptian President Anwar Sadat ordered the memorial's in 1974 to honor Egyptians who died in the 1973 October War. The memorial was inaugurated in October 1975, then later chosen as the place for Sadat's tomb after his assassination in October 1981.

Today, at the somber ceremony a large honor guard and a military band were present. A black marble square is the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and, a few steps away, a white marble square is Sadat's tomb. Hagel laid a wreath at each tomb.

Later, during the cordial meeting with Morsi, the secretary reaffirmed the importance of the U.S.-Egypt military relationship, a senior defense official said, adding that Morsi “very much appreciated that affirmation and himself reaffirmed the importance.”

Discussions included the Egyptian domestic situation, he added, and Morsi offered his thoughts to the secretary about the situation there.

“We talked about Syria at some length in terms of the president offering his views on the situation in Syria and again in terms of the perception of the threat and what Syria's future may mean for all of us, whether in the region or for the international community more broadly,” the defense official said.

The two leaders also discussed the importance of a close relationship with Israel, he added, and both reaffirmed the tenets of the Camp David Peace Treaty between Egypt and Israel.

Later, Hagel said he'd had a good meeting with Morsi.

"We discussed, the president and I, many issues this afternoon . . .," the secretary said. "I spent a lot of time with the defense minister and a number of his representatives, some I've known over the years. So I was very happy that I stopped here and pleased that we spent the day, to really take my own assessment of the situation here."

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[Chuck Hagel](#)

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2. China Visit Sparks Dynamic Engagement, Dempsey Says (04-24-2013)

By Karen Parrish
American Forces Press Service

BEIJING, April 24, 2013 – With his visit to China nearly complete, Army Gen. Martin E. Dempsey said today he has been afforded good access to senior Chinese leaders, junior leaders and future leaders.

Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said during a media roundtable that one thread common to the meetings he's attended here is that with power comes responsibility -- local, regional and, increasingly, global.

Dempsey said his discussions in China, which is widely considered the world's greatest rising power, have ranged from regional concerns such as territorial disputes to the potentially global issue of North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Other major topics in his talks here this week, he said, included growing risk in the cyber domain and the U.S. rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region.

Earlier this week, Dempsey met separately with Chinese President Xi Jinping and State Councilor Yang Jiechi. He also met individually and in some group meetings with senior Chinese army officers, including Gen. Chang Wanguan, minister of national defense; Gen. Fan Changlong, vice chairman of the Central Military Commission; and his host for this visit, Gen. Fang Fenghui, chief of the general staff.

Addressing reporters' questions on North Korea today, Dempsey said the ballistic missile and nuclear tests Pyongyang has conducted show that nation is "on a path that will certainly increase risk in the region, and ultimately could present risk globally."

The United States has responded to North Korean provocations in the past, he noted, by denouncing North Korea's path toward nuclear weapons and its failure to live up to agreements and U.N. Security Council resolutions against such development. The U.S. military posture toward a nuclear-armed North Korea is one of deterrence and preparedness, the chairman said.

“If they were to launch, we do have the capability to defend ourselves, our people, our facilities,” Dempsey added.

China, North Korea’s primary ally along with Russia, has been very clear that among its national interests is a non-nuclearized Korean Peninsula, Dempsey said. He added that he will leave China believing that its leaders are “as concerned as we are” about the issue.

Dempsey said his meetings here did not touch on specific measures the Chinese might take in response to further North Korean actions.

“We think there’s still time for North Korea’s leaders to back away from further provocations, and we certainly hope they take the opportunity to do so,” he added.

To questions on cyber concerns involving China, Dempsey said he has the advantage of being able to build on decisions that already have been taken. He noted that during Secretary of State John F. Kerry’s visit here earlier this month, the Chinese agreed to form a cyber working group.

“I reinforced my belief that that was timely and appropriate,” the chairman said. “We had a very useful discussion about how the challenges in cyber are migrating from theft to disruption, and left unaddressed, are likely to lead to destruction.”

The nations that have the strongest economies and rely most on technology are most vulnerable to cyber activity, Dempsey said. In discussions with Chinese leaders, he said, “I encouraged them to put their best and brightest minds to seek a level of collaboration and transparency with us, because it will affect both of our futures.”

The chairman said he supports developing a code of conduct for cyber activity, likening the concept to Albert Einstein’s assertion that “if I had 60 minutes to save the world, I should spend 55 minutes understanding the problem and only five minutes solving it.”

“I think we’re in that ‘55 minutes,’” Dempsey said. “I think we’re in that period of gaining a common understanding. ... Cyber continues to evolve, whether we would like it to or not.”

State, nonstate and individual actors all operate in the cyber domain, he said, and while cyber originated as an open-architecture system designed to allow information to move freely, “there has to be some code of conduct established.”

The chairman also responded to reporters’ questions about the territorial dispute between China and Japan over a group of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea, adjacent to possible undersea oil reserves. Japan refers to them as the Senkaku Islands, while in China they are known as the Diaoyu Islands.

Dempsey noted the United States doesn’t take sides in such disputes and urges peaceful resolution to all such issues.

In discussions, both he and the Chinese were “very candid” about their respective positions on the islands, he said.

“In the case of Japan, in particular, I was careful to remind them that we do have certain treaty obligations with Japan that we would honor,” the chairman said. “And therefore, it was in everyone’s best interest that this be resolved peacefully and without military coercion.”

The chairman said many of the senior and mid-level Chinese military leaders he spoke with here sought clarity about the U.S. rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region.

“I think I was successful in describing it as a long-term process,” he said. “We’ve never suggested this would be something that would manifest itself overnight. But also, it was a strategic imperative for us to rebalance, over time, to the Pacific.”

Economic, security, and demographic trends all lead to the Asia-Pacific region, he said.

“Furthermore, I tell them this wasn’t about them, meaning China. Of course they’re a factor, ... but this wasn’t a strategy that was aimed at them in any way,” Dempsey said.

The chairman added that military considerations are only part of the broader U.S. regional strategy. “I pointed out to them that among the first visitors who came here after our ... rebalancing initiative was announced was Jack Lew, the secretary of the treasury,” he said.

Dempsey noted that President Barack Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping have discussed forging a new relationship between the two countries. “That new relationship will, of course, be established in the context of our other and enduring relationships in the region,” he said.

In every case, Dempsey said, discussion about the rebalance was dynamic.

“I like to believe that my trip here has contributed to a greater understanding of what we’re doing and why,” he said. “But it’s something that we’re going to have to continue to work over time.”

Today, the chairman visited China’s National Defense University, the 4th Aviation Regiment and the Army Aviation Academy.

The cadets Dempsey spoke with are training to become either maintainers or pilots of aircraft, he noted. In discussion with the Chinese cadets, Dempsey said, “they probably asked me a dozen or more questions. One of the questions was about an issue of geostrategic importance, and 11 of them were about leadership.”

“It was fascinating, actually,” he added. “I found them to be genuinely interested in how I described myself as a leader, what were the attributes I thought were important, ... and the difference between junior-level leadership and senior-level leadership.”

The chairman said his answer to the cadets was fundamentally the same thing he would tell a junior military leader in the U.S. forces.

“That is, that what we expect our junior leaders to do is to become competent in their chosen fields, so if you’re an aviator, you should aspire to be the best aviator that you can be,” Dempsey said. “And then, spend as much time thinking about how to be a man or woman of character, because leadership is the combination of competence and character.”

Biographies:

[Army Gen. Martin E. Dempsey](#)

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[Photo Essay: Dempsey Meets With Defense Counterpart in China](#)

3. NATO Allies in Agreement on Afghanistan, Syria, North Korea (04-23-2013)

By Phillip Kurata
Staff Writer

Washington — The United States and its NATO allies are in unanimous agreement about Afghanistan never again becoming a haven for terrorists, about the need for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to leave power and for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to cease its provocations, according to Secretary of State John Kerry.

Speaking at the NATO ministerial conference in Brussels April 23, Kerry said, "My counterparts and I reaffirmed our commitment to the Afghan people and to our determination that Afghanistan not again ever become a haven for terrorists."

"There was a unanimity about the principle that has governed our engagement in Afghanistan — in together, out together," he said.

Kerry said the NATO mission after 2014 when the allies cease combat operations "will be to support, advise, train the Afghan military on an ongoing basis as well as engage in counterterrorism activity."

Regarding the conflict in Syria, Kerry said the first choice of all the NATO allies is a "political resolution" in which President Bashar al-Assad leaves power to enable Syria to "move forward with its future."

"The mass murder that is taking place outside Damascus is unacceptable. We committed, all of us, to the notion that we must continue to work together in Europe, elsewhere, to root out extremism," Kerry said. He said the humanitarian situation in Syria is reaching "catastrophic proportions."

The NATO allies want to see Syria become a nonsectarian democracy that respects the human rights of all its citizens, particularly members of threatened minorities who fear for their future, Kerry said. He added that because Syria borders NATO member Turkey, the allies are in agreement about deploying Patriot missiles in Turkey to bolster its defense capability with the Syrian conflict raging across the border.

On the sidelines of the NATO consultations, Kerry met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov about Syria. According to Kerry's account, the United States and Russia agree that Assad's departure is inevitable but they have differences of opinion about when and how Assad might leave. Kerry said ultimately Syria's future will be decided by the forces inside Syria.

"You have Assad and you have the opposition, and until they come to some kind of an assessment of what they're willing to do here, this remains a very, very difficult diplomatic initiative to achieve," he said.

Turning to North Korea, the NATO allies unanimously view Pyongyang's provocations as violations of international agreements, a threat to the stability of East Asia and a global threat to nonproliferation, Kerry said. He added that the NATO allies are committed to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner, and they urge North Korea to join the effort to accomplish that goal.

4. Hagel, Israeli Officials Vow to Strengthen Bond (04-23-2013)

By Cheryl Pellerin
American Forces Press Service

ABOARD A MILITARY AIRCRAFT, April 23, 2013 – Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel ended his first official visit to Israel by meeting with government officials, taking a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter tour of Israel’s borderlands, and spending time with soldiers from the Israel Defense Forces.

The secretary met yesterday with Israeli President Shimon Peres and this morning with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Both Israeli officials expressed appreciation for President Barack Obama’s visit last month to Israel, and for the staunch U.S. military and security support of Israel.

“This is a difficult and dangerous time. This is a time when friends and allies must remain close -- closer than ever,” Hagel said in remarks before his meeting with Netanyahu at the prime minister’s office in Jerusalem.

“I’m committed to continue to strengthen this relationship, secure this relationship, and as you know, one of the main reasons I’m here is to do that,” he added.

Hagel said he’d had good conversations with Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon and with Peres, and an extensive helicopter tour with Yaalon of the country’s northern border, which it shares with Lebanon.

In an Israeli Army UH-60 Black Hawk manufactured in the United States, Hagel and Yaalon left from the Sde Dov Airport in Tel Aviv on the Mediterranean coast and traveled north into the Golan Heights to Mount Hermon in the northeast part of the Golan plateau.

They also observed the eastern border area, where the eastern edge of the Golan Heights, which Israel captured from Syria in the 1967 Six-Day War and which forms the border between Israel and Syria.

“Once again it reminds me of the dangers and difficulties and challenges” for Israel and other nations in the region,” Hagel said of the border tour. “But I believe together, working with our allies and our friends, we will be able to do what is right for your country and my country, and make this region a better region and a more secure region and make Israel more secure.”

In remarks before Hagel’s meeting with Peres at the presidential residence in Jerusalem, the president spoke about the threat from Iran and expressed his appreciation for the positions of President Barack Obama and Hagel about Israel’s right to defend itself and its people.

Peres also said he believes there is a real chance for peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

“I am here to congratulate you on becoming secretary of defense of the United States of America,” Peres told Hagel. “It’s a role I don’t envy, because I know the present world is not a simple proposition.”

Without going into politics or religion, Peres added, “we can prevent Iran from making themselves a catastrophe for their own sake and for the world. So I want to express my appreciation for your coming to Israel and for the message that you carry.”

Hagel thanked Peres for a long friendship that began years ago when Peres spent an evening having dinner with Hagel, who at the time was “a very junior United States senator,” the secretary said.

“I also bring you greetings from President Obama, who asked me to extend his warmest, best wishes to you and to tell you how much he appreciated his March visit here with you,” he added.

Hagel said he has always appreciated Israel, its people, its leadership and the courage represented by the nation.

“It is a model for the world and the relationship between our two countries,” Hagel said.

The relationship is as strong as it’s ever been, he added, “not only measured by the military-to-military cooperation, but also by all the other metrics that apply to relationships. And as you also noted, prime minister, it is based on common values and respect for others, and that is the foundation of any relationship.”

A senior defense officials told reporters traveling with Hagel that the Defense Department is elevating the level of its military representation at the U.S. Embassy in Israel from the colonel level to the brigadier general level "as a further reflection of our desire to strengthen even further our defense ties with Israel."

After his meeting with Netanyahu, Hagel visited an area near Camp Mitkan Adam, an army base that houses the Israel Defense Forces Special Training Installation, to watch a demonstration of a K-9 unit that trains handlers and dogs for operations to locate and find explosives.

The unit works closely with U.S. forces and has trained U.S. Marine Corps dog teams, some of which are now deployed to Afghanistan. After the demonstration, Hagel met with and thanked the Israeli soldiers for their service.

Hagel’s trip to the Middle East, which began April 20 and will end April 26, also will take the secretary to Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates to discuss common threats and interests in the region, and to finalize agreements that will boost certain military capabilities for Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Biographies:

[Chuck Hagel](#)

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[Hagel: United States Committed to Israel’s Security](#) (04-21-2013)

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5. U.S. Committed to Pacific Rebalance, Carter Says at Harvard (04-23-2013)

By Jim Garamone
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, April 23, 2013 – Even given fiscal constraints, the U.S. military still can carry out the strategic rebalance to the Pacific, Deputy Defense Secretary Ash Carter said at the Harvard Institute of Politics tonight.

North Korea is an important exception to the general atmosphere in the region, the deputy secretary said. “First Japan rose and prospered, and then South Korea rose and prospered, and then Southeast Asia rose and prospered,” he added. “Today, India and China – in their different ways – rise and prosper. That’s a good thing. It was all assisted by the United States, but none of it was a sure thing, given the shape that Asia was in at the end of World War II.”

The principles included a commitment to free and open commerce, a just international order that emphasized rights and responsibilities of nations, open access, and the principle of resolving conflicts without force.

“We believe that our strong security presence in the Asia-Pacific has provided a critical foundation and in one sense our rebalance says we are going to continue to provide this balance into the future,” Carter said. U.S. partners in the region welcome American leadership and robust engagement, and the values that underlie them, he added, so the rebalance will be welcomed and reciprocated. He stressed that the strategy is not aimed at any one country or group of countries.

The rebalance is possible because the U.S. effort in Iraq has ended and the American presence in Afghanistan is winding down, Carter said. There will be a higher percentage of American naval power in the Pacific than the Atlantic -- a reversal of current strategy – and the Air Force will increase its posture and presence in the region, he told the Harvard audience.

Allies will see more of the U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps in the coming years than they have in the last decade. “Why is that? Because they have been in Iraq and Afghanistan, and now they are coming home to the Asia-Pacific,” Carter said.

Working with allies and friends is a huge part of the shift, the deputy secretary said. The United States is working with the Japanese, South Korean, Philippine and Australian governments to enhance contacts and cooperation. Australia is hosting a rotational Marine Corps presence in Darwin. Japanese and American officials are working on a basing plan for American forces in the country, including the relocation of Marine Corps Air Station Futenma on the Japanese island of Okinawa, Carter said.

The United States and South Korea are working together to defend South Korea from North Korean aggression, and American service members are continuing to work to strengthen the Philippine military.

Rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific region is happening on a global scale, and it is happening within the region, Carter said. Northeast Asia always has been the center of gravity for American forces, he added, but now, more forces will be in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean area. “This is a recognition of the importance of Southeast Asia and South Asia to the region as a whole,” he explained.

Friends and allies recognize this, Carter said, and the first or four U.S. littoral combat ships arrived a few days ago in Singapore. The United States is working closely with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and will conduct exercises with the nations of that group. And after decades of no contact, there is now limited contact with the Burmese.

India is a key nation in the region and the world, Carter said. “Our security interests with India converge on maritime security and broader regional issues including India’s Look East policy,” he added. “We’re also looking to broaden our industrial base policy with India, moving beyond a vendor/purchaser relationship to co-develop and co-produce with the Indians.”

The list goes on, Carter said.

The United States military is investing in the personnel capital that will be needed to ensure the new strategy works, the deputy secretary said, and American service members are going through the language and culture training needed to understand the nuances of these countries.

Biographies:

[Ash Carter](#)

6. United States Doubles Aid to Syrian Opposition (04-21-2013)

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — Secretary of State John Kerry announced that the United States is doubling nonlethal humanitarian assistance to the regime opposition in Syria to underscore America’s firm support for a political resolution to the two-year-old violent crisis in Syria.

The aid was announced by Kerry followed a marathon meeting with Syrian Opposition Coalition President Moaz al-Khatib, members of the coalition’s leadership and other international partners supporting the opposition. That meeting ended early April 21 in Istanbul. In a written announcement, Kerry said the aid is also “for the opposition’s advancement of an inclusive, tolerant vision for a post-Assad Syria.”

“This conflict is now spilling across borders and is now threatening neighboring countries,” Kerry said during a press briefing with al-Khatib and Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. “The president directed me to step up our efforts.”

The new assistance is scheduled to be provided by April 30.

Opposition leader al-Khatib told journalists that “our revolution is for the entire Syrian people.” The coalition issued a communiqué at the conclusion of the meeting declaring that its stated aim is “a political solution” to the civil conflict, that it rejected extremism, and that a post-Assad Syria would be both pluralistic and based on the rule of law.

The United States pledged an additional \$123 million assistance package that brings the total U.S. nonlethal assistance to the opposition and to civil society groups to \$250 million since civil strife began in Syria.

And Kerry announced approximately \$25 million in additional food assistance for Syrians who remain inside Syria as well as those who have fled to nearby countries, recognizing the devastating

humanitarian situation as a result of the ongoing crisis. “The United States is the largest donor of food assistance both within Syria and for refugees in the affected neighboring countries and is providing a total of \$409 million in humanitarian assistance for the Syrian crisis,” the written statement said.

The food aid will provide 25,500 metric tons of wheat — providing a four-month supply of flour to more than 1 million people — as well as food rations for those inside Syria and refugees in Jordan affected by the violence, the statement said. And the U.N. World Food Programme will begin distributing the wheat to those in need in all 14 Syrian governorates as quickly as possible, the State Department said.

According to the United Nations, more than 70,000 people have been killed in the ongoing civil conflict.

The crisis began March 15, 2011, largely as popular, peaceful protests, but expanded into a civil conflict in response to a violent crackdown by the regime of Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad. Assad deployed the Syrian army in April 2011 to halt the nationwide protests. The protesters have demanded the resignation of Assad and his regime.

Kerry also urged international partners gathered in Istanbul, as well as Friends of the Syrian People, to make similar pledges of assistance to the coalition and the Supreme Military Council (SMC), the military wing of the opposition coalition, with the goal of reaching \$1 billion in total international support for the opposition, the statement said.

“The United States will also use a portion of this non-lethal assistance to implement President Obama’s directive to provide an expanded range of support to the Supreme Military Council,” the statement said. “We intend to expand this new support beyond military food rations and medical kits to include other types of non-lethal supplies, which would be determined in collaboration with SMC leadership.”

Kerry said that the United States will work with the Syrian coalition and other opposition representatives to determine how the new nonlethal assistance can best support their efforts to meet the needs of the Syrian people and lead the way to a political transition that will bring an end to the civil conflict.

Kerry met with al-Khatib and the Syrian Opposition Coalition and foreign ministers from the core group of nations supporting opposition efforts in Syria. This group is known as the London 11, and, in addition to the United States, involves Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Italy, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom, according to a senior State Department official in a background briefing en route to Istanbul April 19.

While in Istanbul Kerry is also scheduled to meet with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. He also will hold security and bilateral consultations with Turkish leaders, according to a senior State Department official.

The secretary leaves April 22 for meetings with NATO foreign ministers in Brussels that will include a series of bilateral talks, the NATO-Russia Council and a separate meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

7. Democratic Trends in Middle East, Burma Headline Rights Report (04-19-2013)

By Charlene Porter
Staff Writer

Washington — The difficulty of systemic transition in Middle East nations and measured progress toward democracy in Burma are the highlights of the **2012 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices**, issued by the U.S. Department of State April 19.

“The hope of the early days of the Arab Awakening has run up against the harsh realities of incomplete and contested transitions,” according to the report’s introduction.

Citizens of the region demonstrated for dignity, education and self-determination in 2011, but many found continued resistance in 2012. Secretary of State John Kerry presented the report at a press briefing.

“The vision of so many who have fought and sacrificed across the region will never be realized if their human rights are denied or ignored,” Kerry said. He decried the “murder, mayhem and more bloodshed” that Bashar al-Assad has inflicted on the people of Syria and their two-year pursuit of greater human rights.

Burma’s “historic transition towards democracy” is one of the positive highlights for human rights in 2012. Kerry said the “calm courage” of democracy activist Aung San Suu Kyi has helped bring Burma to this crossroads and will continue to do so in the future.

“After decades of confinement, not unlike Nelson Mandela,” Kerry said, “she has come out and been able to forgive, and to start working alongside her former captors to try to build a stronger and freer Burma.”

If Burma remains on this path, Kerry said, its people will discover what advocates of human rights understand to their bones — where human rights are strong, people have better lives. “Economies thrive, rule of law is stronger, governments are more effective and responsive,” Kerry said. “They are countries that lead on the world stage and project stability across their regions.”

Besides a country-by-country analysis of human rights activity in 199 nations, the 2012 report cites some trends that are gaining disturbing momentum. The findings reveal what is described as a “shrinking space for civil society activism.”

“2012 saw new laws impeding or preventing the exercise of freedoms of expression, assembly, association and religion, and heightened restriction on organizations receiving funding from abroad,” said Uzra Zeya, acting assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labor, who appeared at the briefing with Kerry.

She also cited “the harassment, arrest and killing of political, human rights and labor activists.” Nations harm themselves, the report asserts, when they do not open themselves to a lively public dialogue. Discussion and dissent among diverse individuals in a free society brings new ideas and energies into a society.

Open and vibrant media are also an important pillar of a dynamic nation, and the 2012 report reveals disturbing trends in that regard as well.

“Record numbers of journalists were killed in the line of duty or as a consequence of their reporting,” Zeya said. She said some countries are manipulating their laws to incarcerate and stifle journalists, even while citizens are gaining access to technology tools and using new media for social discussion and the exchange of ideas.

The 2012 human rights report also criticized persistent social policies persecuting vulnerable groups, such as women and girls; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons; people with disabilities; and other minority groups. Legal migrant workers are another group that does not receive adequate protection under current laws in many nations, the report states.

While Kerry reviewed this annual presentation many times as a member of the U.S. Senate, the 2012 report is the first to be issued during his term as secretary of state. He called the compilation and release of the report a department activity that inspires great pride, demonstrating the nation’s commitment to fundamental values for all people and to the individuals still seeking those rights in some of the world’s darker corners.

The annual report on human rights is prepared by the State Department under a mandate from the U.S. Congress. The report, begun in the 1970s, is viewed as a national responsibility to highlight international human rights standards. Congress uses the report as a reference in shaping and funding foreign policy decisions.

The full text of [2012 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices](#) is available on the State Department website.

8. Kerry Cites Urgency in Middle East Peace Process (04-17-2013)

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — Secretary of State John Kerry says there is urgency in achieving a two-state solution in Middle East peace talks, and added that both sides — the Israelis and the Palestinians — have a “seriousness of purpose, a commitment to explore how we actually get to a negotiation.”

Kerry, who visited the region in April for the third time since becoming secretary in January, said he is fully committed to the peace process, but the United States now is trying to determine what is possible. He told the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee during a discussion of the State Department’s fiscal year 2014 budget that he could not lay out a schedule or define the process at this stage.

“We’re in the process of working that out with the critical parties,” Kerry testified. “But in my meetings on both sides, I have found a seriousness of purpose, a commitment to explore how we actually get to a negotiation.”

Kerry told the congressional committee that he believes the window for a two-state solution is shutting. The two-state solution calls for the establishment of a Palestinian state that lives at peace alongside Israel, and requires each side to agree to a number of commitments and measures designed to cement the peace process.

“We have some period of time, in a year to year-and-a-half to two years, or it’s over,” Kerry said in a blunt assessment. Kerry said that everyone he has discussed the Middle East peace process with and all of the supporters globally — those who care about the evolving peace process — want

negotiations to move forward because they are worried that the opportunity for an eventual peace is slipping away.

“There’s an urgency to this, in my mind, and I intend, on behalf of the president’s instructions, to honor that urgency and see what we can do to move forward,” Kerry testified.

Kerry also testified that it is crucial to Middle East peace progress to strengthen the Palestinian Authority. Failing to strengthen the Authority, he said, works against everyone’s interests.

“We need to recognize, even as there are difficulties, a lot is happening” in the Palestinian Authority, he said. “There is a level of cooperation, which is growing, and capacity that’s growing. I think that to not invest would be remarkably short-sighted, particularly given where we are now.”

On Syria, Kerry told the congressional committee that the United States is working closely with the Syrian opposition, with the Syrian military coalition, and with core allies in providing assistance. He recently met with Syrian opposition representatives in London on the sidelines of the Group of Eight foreign ministers’ meeting.

“I am flying to Istanbul for a Saturday April 20 meeting with all of the core group members and more of the Syrian opposition because we’re trying to get everybody on the same page,” he added.

The current assessment is that the opposition forces are making considerable headway in pushing out the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and that “Assad’s days are numbered,” the secretary said.

Kerry told the panel that the United States wants to make certain that the people it is supporting are committed to pluralism, diversity and a democratic process, and that all Syrians are being represented.

“So we’re trying to proceed carefully to make sure that we’re not contributing to a worse mess but that we’re actually finding a constructive path forward,” he said.

Kerry testified that the United States is closely communicating with allies and others concerned about the nuclear weapons enrichment program being developed by Iran with the aim of creating nuclear bombs. He said the United States and its allies are discussing the time frame on the enrichment program and that time’s running out to prevent weapons development.

“The president has made his policy crystal clear,” Kerry said. “No option is off the table, and Iran will not get a nuclear weapon. And we’re going to continue to leave the door to diplomacy open.”

Separately, the Pentagon announced that Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel will travel to Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates April 20–27.

“Hagel will first travel to Israel where he will meet with Minister of Defense Moshe Ya'alon, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Shimon Peres to further the close military-to-military relationship between the United States and Israel,” the Pentagon said in a statement April 17.

Hagel's trip follows on President Obama's visit to Israel, the Palestinian Territories and Amman, Jordan, in March. Hagel travels to Jordan to receive briefings on international efforts to address the crisis in Syria and to discuss U.S. and Jordanian cooperation to prepare for a number of contingencies.

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Later Hagel travels to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, where he will meet with Saudi leaders on regional defense matters. In Cairo, Hagel will meet with senior Egyptian military and civilian officials to discuss the U.S.-Egypt defense partnership, as well as Egypt's democratic transition. Hagel concludes this trip in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.
