



Remarks at Forum for the Future

Remarks

William J. Burns
Deputy Secretary
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I thank all whose hard work made this gathering possible: the Tunisian Government; under whose leadership we have seen unprecedented engagement with civil society; my counterparts from the nations of the G8 and Broader Middle East and North Africa; our Tunisian civil society and private sector partners, ARFORGHE and the Tunisian-American Chamber of Commerce; and the U.S. League of Women Voters. And I want to congratulate next year's chairs, Egypt and the United Kingdom.

I am honored to be back at the Forum and delighted to be back in Tunisia, a cradle of Arab democracy and a friend to the United States. Secretary Clinton was eager to be here with you, but is home recovering from a small illness. Two years ago in Doha, she addressed this Forum at a time when the streets of most Arab cities were deceptively quiet. She warned then that, without reform and openness, "in too many places, in too many ways, the region's foundations are sinking into the sand." Soon after, President Ben Ali went into exile, and the men and women of Tunisia set into motion events that have transformed the Arab world.

Since then, we have seen democratic breakthroughs; idealism and courage that changed the course of nations; and acts of common humanity that touched the world's conscience. There has been enormous progress. But in too many places, in too many ways, the hopes of those early days have run up against difficult realities: atrocities in Syria, unrest in Egypt and Tunisia, and terrorism in Benghazi. Today, the region faces new challenges arising from democratic transitions alongside the old political stagnation and economic frustration. Many feel a sense of uncertainty about what the future holds for them.

The challenge confronting all of us is to help the people of the region build stronger foundations – more dignified, more just, more free and thus more durable.

Americans have strong opinions about what that entails. We believe that representative government, open economies, rights and protections, and vibrant civil society are essential building blocks of successful societies.

But we come to these challenges with a healthy dose of humility. Our own democratic transition took fifteen years to deliver a President, Congress, and Constitution—and even then it required ten amendments to pass and a civil war to realize its potential. We know that democracies belong to and are built by their people. The most consequential decisions belong to you.

And the challenges of this moment are immense. Debates and divisions suppressed for decades are resurfacing. Institutions are being held accountable for the first time by leaders who are governing for the first time. Young people are impatient for reform and results. Citizens and governments are negotiating democratic rules of the road.

We cannot let the difficulties of these early days deter us from a path we never thought would be easy. The people of this region have made clear that they no longer accept the old choice between stability and progress, and neither should we. The enduring cooperation our interests and ideals demand will be difficult to sustain without the popular consent.

Each country will follow its own path, but those that do not respond to the aspirations of their people will face unrest. Transitioning countries will have to build trust in democratic institutions. Countries like Morocco and Jordan will have to keep working to stay firmly on the path of reform. And those countries that bet on repression will not be able to hold back the tide forever. For our part, we will be there to support efforts to empower citizens because we believe that supporting democratic transitions and political reform is not simply a matter of idealism, it is a strategic necessity.

All of us—at this Forum and beyond—will have to help the people of this region find not just stability, but sustainable democracy, sustainable prosperity, and sustainable security and peace. Let me discuss each of these in turn.

II. Sustainable Democracy

First, to be durable and meaningful, democracy must mean more than elections. We have to build systems and institutions that work—with rules and safeguards, rights and freedoms, and a spirit of inclusion. Otherwise, transitions risk relapsing into authoritarianism or falling into chaos.

Across the region, the greatest danger to political opening and reform today is the sense that politics is a zero sum game in which the participation of others represents a threat. New voices do bring debate and even heated competition. But democratic decision making is one of the best tools we have to resolve differences peacefully. When democracy takes root, people respect the process even when they dislike the outcome. They have faith that there will be a next election and another chance for their point of view to prevail. As those of you from the region know far better than any outsider ever will, this is a region where divisions of ideology, geography, faith, gender, and ethnicity run deep. And this a moment that demands compromise more than confrontation and dialogue more than dictation. For example, when Yemen faced a political crisis, it launched a national dialogue on the principle that all parties should have a seat at the table. For all its challenges, Yemen's transition is moving forward. Allowing diverse and dissenting voices to participate fully in the national project is not a sign of weakness; it is a source of strength and a necessary ingredient for long-term success.

The same is true in Egypt today, where we are deeply concerned about the situation. As the lack of Egyptian consensus regarding the constitution continues, the United States stands firm in our support for the Egyptian people as they seek a path forward consistent with these principles. We reiterate our call for meaningful consultations without preconditions between the government and the opposition to agree on the way forward. There are crowds opposing the steps that President Morsi has taken and crowds who support him. Both call themselves protectors of the revolution. As Egypt's first democratically elected leader, President Morsi has a particular responsibility to work to build greater consensus on such important issues as the constitution. At the same time, other political leaders in Egypt also should act constructively to contribute to such a consensus. The future of Egyptian democracy depends not on the ability of one side to prevail over another, but on the commitment of all to engage in an inclusive process to negotiate their differences – one that may not resolve every disagreement – but one that must yield a more united path forward.

Across the region, those in power have a special responsibility to make clear that force is no substitute for politics. A majority is no substitute for dialogue and consensus – especially on something as important as a constitution. Those in the opposition have a responsibility to work constructively to resolve differences and hold their countries together. And all must condemn and prevent violence because it poisons politics.

Tunisia's revolution remains full of promise. But it, too, faces the challenge of bringing all of its citizens into a single national project. Leaders have tough choices to make to reach consensus, complete a constitution that enshrines Tunisians' rights and pave the path for an empowered, permanent government next year. Strikes, riots and the same economic grind that led to a street vendor's desperate act all speak to the work ahead. But America still believes Tunisia can and must be a model for the rest of the region. And we will stand with Tunisians as they deal with the interlocking challenges of transforming its political system, protecting its people, and developing its economy.

Whether democracy arrives quickly or slowly, it demands a set of rights and protections for all. I want to congratulate those Tunisian men and women who mobilized to convince the National Constituent Assembly that Tunisia's first democratic constitution must recognize women's equality. Many countries are enshrining women's equality in constitutions. Some have outperformed the G8 countries in electing women to their parliaments. But I urge all in this room to do much more to bring women into positions of leadership because no democracy and no economy can succeed in the 21st century with half its population held back.

These questions did not begin with Islamists and do not end there. We hold parties of every political stripe to these same standards: All must respect the rules and safeguards of democracy based on universal principles of human rights. They must reject violence, terrorism, and extremism; abide by the rule of law; honor international agreements; and protect the rights and dignity of all. In the "creative" rumor-mill of the Middle East, there are those who say we have cut a deal to bring the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups to power. We have not cut a deal with anyone. We have made clear that we will work with elected leaders and assess all parties based on their actions and these standards. And we have made clear to all parties that cooperation on regional challenges does not mean a return to the old, unsustainable bargain. When it comes to building sustainable democracies, the most consequential distinction is not between Islamists and secularists, but between those who embrace a rights-respecting pluralistic approach and those who seek to impose their own vision on others.

III. Sustainable Opportunity

All of these ingredients are essential to building sustainable democracy. So is delivering jobs and opportunity, the second point I want to discuss today.

In the short term, we need to be clear-eyed: unrest and uncertainty have strained already difficult economic circumstances. America and the international community are working to direct significant support to transition countries and others seeking to stabilize their economies.

But we also need to build new partnerships and initiatives to broaden economic opportunity. As we gather here, the third annual Global Entrepreneurship Summit is happening in Dubai, connecting Arab entrepreneurs with networks and capital from around the world. We have launched Egyptian-American and Tunisian-American Enterprise Funds to help small and medium-sized businesses create jobs. And I am particularly pleased to announce that the Chairman of the Tunisian-American Enterprise Fund's board will be Mr. Bowman Cutter, a widely respect international investor with over 30 years of experience in private equity and as a senior economic policy advisor to President Bill Clinton. And the whole of our government is working together to facilitate trade and investment.

We want to work together to leave behind the old systems of patronage and state control to nurture modern economic systems where talent is cultivated and rewarded, where what you know drives your success more than who you know, where nations can trade with their neighbors and compete in the global economy, where opportunity is open to all. Conventional assistance, no matter how generous, will not be enough. Governments also need to take on policy, regulatory, and institutional reform. And we and our European partners must think, and act, more ambitiously to open up trade and investment across the region.

We also need to redouble our efforts to invest in the region's youth and equip them to compete in a global economy. To that end, we have launched the Partners for a New Beginning Initiative—with a local chapter here in Tunisia that is helping over one thousand Tunisian students about to graduate college develop business plans. And we are proud to support the Smart Center, launched with the help of the Tunisian-American Chamber of Commerce to help startups get off the ground and ensure the Arab awakening is also an economic awakening.

IV. Sustainable Security and Peace

We all know that violent extremism and unresolved conflict not only cause suffering, but disrupt and distract from reform and growth. And this brings me to my third and final point: just as enduring democracy depends on widespread prosperity, both depend on lasting peace and security.

The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is one more status quo in the region that is unsustainable. The Palestinian people, like all people, deserve dignity and the right to decide their own future. All of us have to find ways to support steps in the right direction, to turn a cease-fire in Gaza into a lasting calm and to empower those Palestinian leaders who embrace nonviolence and coexistence. And we in America will not lose sight of our obligation to show leadership and press ahead for peace, as the Secretary did by traveling to the region during the ceasefire negotiations last month.

In Syria, all of us are frustrated that this bloody conflict drags on. But in a growing number of towns and villages, a new Syria is being born. We are working to help ensure that it is democratic and peaceful. Earlier this week, we agreed to recognize the opposition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people, and we made clear that with this role come responsibilities to become ever more organized and inclusive, to protect human rights, and to stand firm against extremism that will only sow division and undermine the new Syria emerging.

Efforts to help the Syrian people build a better future are made more difficult by Iran—which exports terrorism as well as repression, brutalizes its own people and risks injecting an arms race into an already volatile region. We are making every effort to ensure that sanctions don't deprive Iranians of food, medicines, and humanitarian goods. But we are committed to prevent—not contain—a nuclear-armed Iran.

The inescapable lesson of the past two years is that security requires more than military might and must be pursued without committing human rights violations that create new grievances or harden existing divisions within societies. We have seen governments felled by their own failure to bridge the distance between governments and people. We enhance regional security by protecting people's basic rights, by training police to respect peaceful protests, and by building institutions that are responsive and accountable.

A valued strategic partner and longtime friend, Bahrain has initiated a process of reform based upon the recommendations contained in last year's report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, which King Hamad courageously commissioned. We welcome the initial steps the Bahraini Government has taken to implement the report's recommendations and encourage Bahrain to move decisively along this difficult but necessary path. We cannot mistake a calm enforced by security measures for long term stability. That can only be achieved by engaging citizens, hearing them out, addressing their concerns and aspirations, and giving them a true stake in the outcomes. It is through engagement, discussion, and ultimately negotiation that Bahrainis of all sides can enjoy a prosperous, stable, and secure future.

And of course, sustainable peace depends on building a spirit of tolerance and inclusion – a positive spirit that is ultimately the best antidote to hatred and extremism. When our Embassy in Tunis was attacked and the American school was burned, Tunisia's Government condemned the attacks and pledged to bring the perpetrators to justice. For Tunisia's own sake, Tunisian authorities need to continue to follow through on this pledge and continue efforts to reform the security forces to make them more accountable and

effective. We were inspired when tens of thousands of Libyans made clear that those who killed Ambassador Stevens do not speak for the new Libya. Chris Stevens embodied the best of America. He was a man who believed in dialogue, who believed in Libyans and the promise of their revolution, who believed in the capacity and determination of Arabs to transform their world and build a better future. In honor of the late Ambassador Christopher Stevens, the United States will create a new exchange program to bring high school students and teachers from twenty countries together to promote peaceful conflict resolution and search for common ground.

V. Civil Society

Whether the cause is human rights, economic fairness or anti-extremism, civil society is the lifeblood of democratic politics. This is the idea that inspires this Forum and makes it both unique and effective. Civil society supports the marketplace of ideas and the economic marketplace. NGOs help champion transparency, which gives citizens the tools they need to be active participants in the political and economic decisions that shape their lives. They fight corruption and economic exclusion, two of the most powerful drivers of disenfranchisement and discontent. Laws that aim to inhibit civil society or constrain its actions only limit the potential of the communities it serves.

All of us must work together to protect fundamental freedoms of expression, association, and assembly. And today, the United States is establishing a new Journalist Response Fund to offer training and emergency assistance to journalists, bloggers, and citizen journalists whose work places them at-risk of being targeted by authorities.

Unfortunately, new progress toward openness has brought with it new pushback against civil society. There are even those who say the whole concept of civil society is a Western imposition. But civil society, by its very nature, arises from local needs and interests. And after the last two years of citizen engagement – from Tunisian human rights groups to Syrian bakers and teachers collectives to religious, social, and political movements – how can anyone honestly claim that civil society is not indigenous to this region? All of us need to come together to protect the fundamental freedoms of expression, association, and assembly. Today I am pleased to announce that we are launching a new Freedom of Association Index—modeled after the World Bank’s Ease of Doing Business Survey—to measure and track the ease of forming and operating NGOs in countries around the world.

As President Obama and Secretary Clinton have said, if you raise your voice on behalf of rights, freedoms, and the needs of your communities, we will be there to support you. We support the development of civil society, media, and political parties, with an emphasis on youth, women, and marginalized groups. We provide assistance, without bias, to nonviolent groups working to better their societies. And we are continually seeking the most effective ways to strengthen civil society. In that spirit, today we join the German Marshall Fund and the Governments of Tunisia and the Netherlands as founding supporters of a MENA Partnership for Democracy and Development. Based in Tunis and with an independent board, the Partnership will complement traditional funding and training by providing tools for action, connecting civil society organizations to a clearinghouse of lawyers, social marketers, pollsters, and other service providers, experts, and experienced practitioners.

Everywhere, we will seek arrangements built on mutual responsibility and the inclusiveness I have spoken of today. For example, alongside traditional aid, we have requested from the U.S. Congress a Middle East North Africa Incentive Fund that will field proposals from partners on the ground.

This is a region remaking itself before our eyes. Countries will succeed or fail based on the choices of their people and leaders—whether they sit in a ministry, a corporate boardroom or a cramped NGO office. By being here together and signing this year’s Forum declaration, you are making an important statement about the future you seek—one in which the different elements of society work together for the common good of communities and nations.

The divisions and difficulties are real. The challenges ahead are formidable. But so are the achievements of the people of this region over the past two years. And even these pale in comparison to what is possible if we can open up societies and economies to tap the talents of all. Here, at the Forum for the Future, we should aim for nothing less than to leave behind a firmer foundation than the one we inherited. And for our children and our children's children, let us never stop working toward a region and a world of greater freedom, possibility, and peace.

Thank you.