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“Political Pluralism in the OSCE Mediterranean Partners”

**Testimony before the
United States Helsinki Commission**

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Chairman Cardin, Co-chairman Smith, Members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to present my views on political pluralism in several of the Arab Spring countries. The views I express today are solely my own and do not represent those of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not take policy positions. I commend you for this timely and important hearing.

In addition to my current position as vice president for the Middle East and Africa at USIP, I had the opportunity in 2011-2013 to coordinate assistance to Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria at the State Department.

I will concentrate this morning on two of the OSCE Mediterranean Partners for Cooperation—Tunisia and Egypt. I believe they demonstrate the range of experience and practice that we can see in this region. Tunisia has demonstrated remarkable maturity and commitment to the ideal of political inclusiveness; Egypt has not.

I will review briefly several of the events of the past two years in these two countries; I will then evaluate briefly the actions taken by leaders in Tunisia and Egypt.

Events of 2013-2014

At the beginning of 2013, Tunisia was struggling politically and economically and facing violent unrest. The elections in 2012 had given the moderate Islamist party Ennahda a plurality. It formed a coalition with two secular parties, called the Troika, and was attempting to both

govern and write a new constitution. After broad consultations around the country on various aspects of a new constitution, parliamentary work on the constitution had stalled by early 2013.

The Tunisian economy, like others in the region, was suffering from low investment, low tourism and high unemployment.

The attack on the U.S. embassy in Tunis by extremist Islamist forces in September 2012 had demonstrated the weakness of the government and its security forces. The instability was then exacerbated in early 2013 with the assassination of a prominent opposition party member, Chokri Belaid. While the extent of violence in Tunisia was small compared to the numbers killed in other countries of the region, these incidents shocked Tunisians and led to two events: first, the resignation of the Ennahda prime minister, and second, an effort by civil society leaders to pull the country back from the crisis. Several political parties supported the effort; Ennahda did not.

At the same time--the beginning of 2013--the Islamist government that had formed in Egypt under Mohammed Morsi was also struggling to govern and write a constitution. Unlike in Tunisia, however, the main Islamist party in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood, had won a majority in the parliamentary elections, and Mr. Morsi had won a tight race for president. Also unlike Tunisia, the Islamist majority in the Egyptian parliament and the Islamist president forced through a constitution without attempting to achieve consensus. Further, security forces and Muslim Brotherhood supporters attacked peaceful demonstrators, women's rights were violated, journalists were suppressed, and police abuse continued. President Morsi issued a decree that exempted his decisions from judicial review. Demonstrations grew in opposition to

the government's handling of the constitutional process as well as to social legislation in the parliament and economic mismanagement, leading to a large, army-sponsored demonstration on June 30, 2013, and a military coup on July 3 that installed a military-backed civilian government.

At this point, events in Tunisia and events in Egypt intersect. Before the coup in Egypt, the Tunisian Islamist party Ennahda had resisted efforts by civil society to bridge political differences within Tunisian society. Ennahda had rejected invitations to join a dialogue sponsored by four parts of Tunisian civil society known as the Quartet and made up of the largest labor union, the association of employers, the Tunisian bar association and the league of human rights advocates. After the coup in Egypt—and another political assassination in Tunis—Ennahda decided to join what was then being called the Tunisian National Dialogue. The Quartet-led discussions lasted through the fall and into the winter, until, in January 2014, they reached agreement on three important points:

- They agreed on the text of a new constitution, which was then referred to the parliament and won overwhelming approval from its members.
- They agreed that new elections, presidential and parliamentary, would take place by the end of the year, that is, before December 2014.
- Even more remarkably, the Ennahda-led coalition government agreed to step down and to hand over power to a non-political, interim government that would take governmental influence out of preparations for the elections.

In Egypt, meanwhile, the military-installed government had begun a harsh crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, killing more than 1,000 Egyptians and jailing and prosecuting thousands more. Hundreds at a time have been convicted and sentenced to death, often on little evidence. The repression, which the new military-backed government defended as a fight against terrorists, soon extended to journalists, activists and liberal groups accused of supporting terrorists. This year, Field Marshal and Defense Minister al-Sisi, who once professed no interest in the military taking over the country, declared his candidacy for president under a newly ratified constitution and, in May, won an overwhelming victory, even though turnout in the election was disappointing. U.S. assistance to the government of Egypt, cut off after the coup as called for by U.S. law, was partially restored.

Political Pluralism in Tunisia

Political pluralism in the region is at its broadest in Tunisia today. The formation of a coalition government including both the Islamist Ennahda and two secular parties demonstrated that Islamist and secular political parties are able to work together.

Islamist leaders soon learned that extremist violence, rather than reinforcing their position, undermined it, and that strong security measures were required to quell such attacks and maintain stability.

The Tunisian constitution, drafted after extensive consultation across the country, is considered a model in the region, acknowledging the Muslim foundation of Tunisian society

and guaranteeing rights to religions, sexes and political streams of thought. The constitution was approved as a result of wide consultation across the country, thorough debate in the parliament, political compromise struck by civil society leaders, and adherence to agreed rules as the parliament ratified the constitution overwhelmingly, with the parliamentarians standing to sing the Tunisian national anthem after the historic vote.

The leading role of civil society--pulling the country back from violence, division and gridlock--is a model of dialogue over confrontation and conflict. The Tunisian National Dialogue, led by the non-governmental Quartet, was able to find consensus, bring the quarreling political parties into the discussion, and forge compromises that have set Tunisia on a positive—if still fragile—course toward a successful transition.

Political Pluralism in Egypt

In Egypt, on the other hand, political pluralism is, at best, reminiscent of previous military dictatorships. Freedom of the press and for civil society organizations may be more constrained now than under previous governments.

Islamist leaders drew the wrong lessons from their elections, ignoring voices of minorities in parliament and society. Ramming through a constitution that was not broadly supported contributed to the rise of the opposition.

The new military-backed government under President al-Sisi has not limited its security measures to violent extremists and has instead used police and the courts to eliminate political opposition.

Recommendations

The cases of Tunisia and Egypt point the way toward potentially effective U.S. and international strategies for the region. First, the United States and the international community should increase support for the Tunisian government and people as they continue to demonstrate that political pluralism is compatible with Islamic societies and is the formula for a successful transition to democracy. This assistance should include financial support--in the form of loan guarantees, project financing, and incentives for private investment--from Western governments, international financial institutions and the international private sector. The United States should negotiate and sign a free-trade agreement with Tunisia. Western governments should provide training and equipment to Tunisia's security forces. The United States and Europe should increase opportunities for Tunisian students to study abroad.

Second, on Egypt, the United States and the international community should continue to condemn the repression, publicly and privately, as counterproductive and short-sighted. We have learned a lot in the past few years about governance in the Middle East; one clear lesson is that political oppression is not an effective tactic to increase stability.

U.S. assistance to Egypt should concentrate on programs that enable Egyptians to take advantage of educational opportunities, both in Egypt and abroad. A large program of scholarships for Egyptian young people, with an emphasis on women and underdeveloped parts of the country, could pay great dividends for Egypt and U.S.-Egyptian relations.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am happy to answer questions.

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