

**Testimony of Zeinab Elnour Abdelkarim
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The International Foundation for Electoral Systems**

on
Political Pluralism in the OSCE Mediterranean Partners

for
The Helsinki Commission

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Commission, for the opportunity to testify today on the topic of **Political Pluralism in the OSCE Mediterranean Partners**. I appreciate the opportunity to share with you IFES' considerable expertise and experience assessing the overall political, socio-economic, security, humanitarian and other issues likely surrounding the region's democratic transition.

I will begin with a brief synopsis of IFES' work in order to contextualize my testimony. Broadly speaking, IFES supports citizens' right to participate in free and fair elections by strengthening electoral systems, and by building local capacity to deliver sustainable solutions to problems facing countries that seek to enhance their governance structures.

IFES has been active in the Middle East region for over two decades advocating for participatory societies where citizens have the regular opportunity to play an active role in making decisions that affect their lives and in holding their government accountable. IFES utilizes an integrated and innovative approach that empowers both the recognized local authorities, local actors and civil society activists by providing information on democratic norms, elections and political processes, international standards and best practices; carrying out trainings for key stakeholders on democratic and transitional issues; and providing resources and tools for civil society activists to implement civic education activities and prepare the country for a democratic transition.

The Arab uprisings reaffirmed the importance of democratic representation and the need for opportunity, access and freedom. Today, IFES programming continues to respond to challenges across the region in countries such as Libya, Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen. Our work across the region was made possible by direct funding assistance from the U.S. Government and other international donors, including the British, Swiss, Canadian and Dutch governments.

Context

The overall situation throughout the Middle East and North Africa remains fragile and very polarized. As Syria's civil war rages on and Iraq's security and stability deteriorate, threats from Al Qaeda, foreign mercenaries and other radical groups stretching from the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula to Africa continue to undermine regional stability.

The trends that played a major role in the Arab uprisings just a few years ago – such as demographic challenges, struggling economies, poor internal security, insufficient access to justice, ineffective governance and stagnant social transformation – continue to affect both the region and individual States. These trends will remain sources of instability, and in some cases violence, in the near future.

Newly-elected governments and institutions continue to face firm resistance from their opponents and have not been successful thus far in managing political distrust, economic uncertainty and internal security. In deeply divided societies where ethnic, social, tribal and political affiliations are key considerations, it is imperative that countries' transitions are managed in a manner that is inclusive and consultative and engenders trust across these divisions. While any future elections in the transitioning countries will represent an opportunity for a population to express its degree of satisfaction with the country's state of affairs, the simmering political and societal conflicts that have plagued the countries of this region for decades, and the slow pace of political reform, will pose challenges for democratization moving forward. The biggest danger is the tendency to reduce democratic practices to voting, constitutional drafting and electoral events. A new constitution or the presence of electoral processes does not necessarily mean that a democratic tradition of transparency and accountability have taken root. It is particularly important for citizens to perceive government affairs, legal reform processes and the country's economic plans as open and transparent. The current developments across the region cannot be considered to evidence a new social contract between regional States and their citizens, in any regard. At best, it can be described as constitutional engineering led by a small elite faction of the dominant force or ethnic/religious group.

Understandably, undeveloped and disorganized political and civil forces as well as nascent civil movements in places like Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Jordan are unable to wield much influence on near-term outcomes of the transition in these countries. However, it is important to note that modern democratic practices evolved over centuries; it makes no sense to look for similarities in a remarkably different context, particularly so early in the game. Rather, it is best to let the political development run its natural course. These are changes that are best measured in decades, not years. It is not realistic to expect a fast and seamless transition to democracy. The history of colonial and imperial rule across the region, as well as the State's domination of the economy and society, shaped a culture of authoritarian political traditions that needs time and comprehensive locally-driven efforts to overcome. Each and every State will evolve into its own distinctive way as it adapts to national, regional and global changes over time.

Additionally and most importantly, the lack of political and societal consensus around major issues – such as the role of Islam and *Shariah* in the affairs of the State and society, the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, and the rights and role of women in their respective societies – is a fundamental internal struggle that cannot be ignored. Any external intervention on these issues has little influence over what is considered an internal struggle that can only be addressed when the peoples of the region genuinely seek to invoke civil liberties, justice and the rule of law regardless of the governing system they choose to implement.

Key issues and areas of concerns that might affect the advance and viability of political pluralism

Analysis in the midst of current political and regional events is never easy, especially as events unfold and their causes and the future itself remain clouded with uncertainty. In retrospect and based on close

monitoring of recent and current events, this testimony seeks to reexamine these regional developments and offer a short outlook on key issues and concerns that will affect the development of political pluralism across the region. The following issues and concerns cover a range of political, economic and social factors that must be discussed when addressing pluralism in the region:

1. **A decline in political legitimacy in some countries:** Political forces overseeing transitions have suffered a serious decline in political legitimacy and public confidence in a number of the countries. The lack of commitment to change, or even attempts to introduce serious changes to the political and socio-economic status quo, have resulted in serious questions about those new governments' true commitment to pluralism and democratic principles. Their refusal to exercise inclusive and transparent governance; the ongoing human rights abuses (including the excessive use of force); torture and other ill-treatment by security forces; unfair trials; and discrimination against women and other religious and ethnic minorities will continue to lead to widespread protests and eventually contribute to further destabilization in what has proven to be an exceptionally fluid environment.
2. **A breakdown in security, rising instability and an increase in both human and weapons trafficking:** Security has been declared the top priority for most governments across the region. There has been a serious lack of stability since the inception of the 2011 uprisings as the security situation has steadily deteriorated and been further compounded by trans-border security threats. Bomb attacks, assassinations and weapons proliferations continue to be a daily problem for most governments, and arms have flowed out across borders and found their way to radical groups operating in the Levant, Arabian Peninsula, Sinai and North Africa. Impunity for political assassinations and other politically and religiously motivated violence is also on the rise across the region. The assassination of the Brigadier General Wissam al-Hassan that took place in Beirut on October 2012 was a dangerous twist that mirrored other successful attempts in Libya, Tunisia, Iraq and Yemen. The recent assassination of Salwa Bugaighis, a Libyan human rights attorney, has also sent a chill through democracy activists across the region.

Furthermore, the ongoing conflict between the different rebel factions in Syria, coupled with the inability of the Iraqi government to establish a viable non-sectarian political system or find a workable relationship between the central government in Baghdad and the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government, is bound to fuel the sectarian wars across the border for many years to come. As a result, parts of Syria and Iraq may well be threatened by secession or disintegration and a more dangerous security situation will emerge for the citizens of these territories.

3. **Economic meltdown and extreme poverty in some countries in the region:** The unstable security climate is one of the main impediments to economic development, and it remains to be seen whether the current governments can continue the pace of political, economic, and social reform over the long-term that many analysts see as crucial to addressing some countries' endemic economic problems. The lack of effort to seriously address these problems does not augur well for stabilization or democratic development and could lead to more protests/insecurity if not addressed in the near-term.

4. **Increased tension between Islamists, socialists, liberals and the other political entities:** Islam was largely absent from the mantras that gave birth to the uprisings; nor has it been at the forefront of any of the nonviolent mass movements in the region since. Recent analysis indicates that the primary cause of discontent and mobilization that led to regime change in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen was an outcry for justice, rights, economic and political reforms. In fact, most of the Islamist movements in these countries did not join the demonstrations in their relevant countries until sometime after they started. However, in most of the transitioning countries or in the other Arab countries that have seen some legal and political reform, Islamists are a force in the new political order as they sought to portray themselves as the vanguard of opposition to the status quo. Examples of this tension can clearly be seen in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. The struggle over the constitutional drafting process in these countries is a prime example of the growing divide between Islamists and liberals as they debated the inclusion of Shariah as the source of all legislation, the role of men and women, and criminalization of attacks against religion and sacred values. These debates have plagued the region for many years and will continue to be at the forefront of the region's political sphere for years to come.
5. **A decline in the status of women, ethnic and religious minorities:** The possibility for all citizens to participate in the management of public affairs is at the very heart of democracy. In the majority of MENA countries, however, the political arena remains largely dominated by men, and is exclusively monopolized by men in some countries. Many fear the new political order of the region will impact universal human rights negatively, especially the already-sparse legal rights and protections in place for women and ethnic minorities. As the current governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya struggled to put together their new constitutions and representative bodies, the issue of the role of women and minorities was embodied in the debates on constitutional articles and quotas.
6. **Power shifts and the geopolitics of the region:** The struggle for dominance in the Persian Gulf and the Levant remains unresolved, volatile and highly dangerous. For decades, there has been fierce competition between the Salafi Saudi-Wahhabi school of thought and the Shiite Islamic Republic of Iran. Both sides have provided military and political backing to their allies across the region for years. Iran on one hand has been one of Iraq and Syria's strongest allies in the Middle East and has stepped up its military and political backing to these two governments in recent years. Similarly, Iran has also provided support, financially and militarily, to Lebanon's Shiite Hezbollah for decades, and is suspected of providing financial support and arms to the Houthi Shiite opposition in its struggle against the Yemeni government. Conversely, the Bahraini government and six other Gulf countries have accused Iran of meddling in its sovereignty and inciting the Shiite uprising. On the other hand, given its vast resources, Saudi Arabia could play a pivotal and decisive role in determining the trajectory of development in Syria, Egypt and Yemen. Its efforts have been aimed at stabilizing neighboring countries, particularly Yemen, Jordan and Bahrain, containing Iran's agenda in the region, and ensuring that the new political order in the countries undergoing transition does not bring the Muslim Brotherhood or an Islamic-democratic model, along the lines of Turkey's AK Party, into power; the Kingdom has serious ideological differences with these two groups.

External regional players, in particular the U.S., Europe, Russia and China and their delayed and sometimes unwelcomed engagement make them ineffective players in influencing the region's political transformation.

7. **Changing regional priorities regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict:** The peace process between Israel and Palestine is no longer the main regional pre-occupation, with the Arab region spiraling dangerously into further conflict and sectarianism. Yet the conflict remains a destabilizing factor that is also spiraling out of control, with no end in sight to the cycle of violence, revenge, killings, kidnappings, bombings and rocket attacks. The role of Hamas in the Gaza strip, as well as the Jewish settlements in lands that are meant to be part of the future Palestinian state, have been the main deal breakers each time the peace negotiations seemed to be about to produce change. Without a political solution that includes an end to the occupation, there is no telling when the current violent cycle will end.
8. **Continued resistance to U.S. involvement in the region:** The U.S. presence in the region, both ideologically and physically, faces a crisis in legitimacy, where mistrust and suspicion are the dominant features of the regions' perception towards the U.S. The post-Saddam period in Iraq has proved to be filled with human tragedies and grave tactical errors; including terror, violence, political instability and a brewing, potentially catastrophic civil war. Additionally, U.S. selectivity in forcing democratization or applying sanctions and embargoes on Middle Eastern countries has been met with much criticism in the region, and it faces sustained disapproval in relation to its reaction or lack thereof to the mass revolts that spread across the region. Most importantly, the self-inflicted disappointments against America's democratic principles and international standards through the torture of prisoners and detainees at U.S.-run facilities in Iraq and Afghanistan; the holding of hundreds of persons in legal limbo at Guantánamo Bay; the turning over of foreign detainees to foreign countries known to practice torture; and the astonishing scale of the U.S. drone and surveillance programs abroad continue to be at the forefront of the regional debate over the U.S. sincerity to uphold justice.
9. **Shrinking space for democracy-building programs:** A growing number of governments across the region are starting to crack down on democracy-building programs and publically denouncing democracy assistance, describing it as illegitimate political meddling in internal affairs and a clear attempt to subvert political order. It is important to note this backlash against and skepticism of democracy aid is global and not limited to the Middle East and is best understood as likely to persist for the foreseeable future. In recent years, some governments have expelled implementers of democracy assistance programs from their soil, prohibited local groups from taking foreign funds, and prosecuted local persons who have participated in trainings conducted by international implementers. They have further formalized this backlash by passing controversial new laws which impose heightened controls on local and foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operating in the country. There can be little doubt that the proponents of this resistance are clearly learning from and feeding off one another, and we should anticipate the space for democracy promotion to continue shrinking in the immediate future. Also, within the space that some of these countries will leave slightly open for this type of programming, we will see a spike in the level of scrutiny that will be imposed by governments on the finances, implementation and participation by local actors on these programs, which can have huge implications on their effectiveness.

Conclusion

Transition to democratic governance is not easy or fast, and the path to introducing and implementing democratic and political reforms varies across countries. It is difficult to predict how long the transformation of the region will take and how far it will go. However, the regional upheaval is far from over and the highly motivated young generation who is on the forefront of the call for transformation will continue to challenge the present circumstances and guard the flame of change.

To remain effective, the international community and groups that promote democracy must come to grips with these new trends and the complicated history of democracy promotion and genuinely rethink their strategies of engagement. There are clear signs of a decline in the legitimacy of democratic systems in many parts of the region, including a crisis in representation, poor voter turnout at elections and referenda, a loss of trust due to poor performance by political parties, corruption, severe dissatisfaction among young people and an increase in human loss due to ongoing armed conflicts. It is critical that democracy promotion move beyond electoral politics and mobilization of the streets to enabling human rights, physical well-being and human development. Unfortunately, the emphasis on democratic elections, participation by civil societies, empowerment of marginalized and ethnic groups and competition between political parties will not guarantee State responses to its citizens' needs or the social and political accountability of the ruling regime in transitioning societies. To the contrary, and as evident by the quick call for elections immediately after the fall of the former regimes in the transitioning countries, open competitive politics often accentuate social differences and lead to violent conflicts.

Undoubtedly, there is a need to re-evaluate the ways in which democratization is supported and sustained. The human security challenges facing the region today require the promotion of a broader concept that includes consensus and peace-building processes, accountability, human rights protection, capacity building for social and economic development, promotion of public involvement and consultation and improvement of political and electoral processes. Disengaging or limiting democratic governance aid to the region at this juncture is a huge mistake; however given the restrictions referenced above, the international community should continue to leverage existing international frameworks, diplomacy and bilateral agreements to find ways to encourage democratic governance and the space for these programs. Efforts to plan future assistance have to take into consideration that democracy building is highly political and not only a technical exercise. Better understanding of the local context and norms, local ownership, and respect for the viewpoints and experiences of the targeted population are key principles that must guide the international community's efforts. Any intervention can easily lose credibility if perceived by the local population as ineffective or tainted by the intervening country's political self-interest.