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**U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Committee on Foreign Affairs**  
**Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia**  
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**“Shifting Sands: Political Transitions in the Middle East, Part 1”**

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Mr. Chairman,

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee to discuss the ongoing political earthquake and consequent tsunami currently washing over the Middle East as well as its implications for the United States. Having just returned from a fact-finding mission to the two countries where it all began, Tunisia and Egypt, I look forward to sharing my view that there is more to celebrate than to fear in these upheavals. If we manage to help the various transitions succeed, our strategic position in the region could be greatly improved. This is not a wishful thought nor is it a guarantee of success. Riding the current wave of change will not be easy and will require creativity, resources, and an ability to convince wary allies that change has to be managed, not stopped or rolled back.

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Before discussing what the region looks like after the dramatic events in Tunisia and Egypt, I'd like to first take a look at what the region looked like through most American eyes just days before Mohamed Bouazizi ignited himself and the region in revolutionary fervor.

With the exception of a few years during the Bush administration, policy toward the region has been quite conservative, with American interests narrowly limited to three

core interests: 1) guaranteeing the world's access to petroleum to fuel the global economy; 2) defending Israel's right to exist and promoting Arab-Israeli peace as the best way to guarantee its continuation, and, 3) developing on-going cooperation with the governments of the region to fight terrorism and the ideology that fuels it, particularly after 9/11.

Achieving these core objectives required building relationships with a number of key allies in the region, principally Egypt and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, traditionally the twin leaders of the Arab World; Egypt, due to its ancient civilization, large population, and critical cultural contribution to the whole of the Arab world and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, due to its natural resources and the huge assets generated by those resources. During this period, Turkey was viewed primarily as a close European, NATO partner separate from the Middle East while Iran, since the fall of the Shah, was seen as the fundamental challenger to the United States and a rival for influence in the region.

For a period of nearly 60 years, the coincidental shared interests between the United States, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and, after the historic signing of the Camp David Accords, Egypt, managed to maintain the status quo. During the 2000s, however, the United States began acting as an anti-status quo power, deposing Saddam Hussein in Iraq and challenging the governments in the region to liberalize both their economies and their politics. This stemmed from the recognition after 9/11 that the vitality of U.S. allies was beginning to erode while a number of reactionary forces interested in reshaping the region to their liking began to emerge. Comprised of both state and non-state actors—including Hamas, Hezbollah, Turkey under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Iran under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, Syria under President Bashar al-Assad, and even Qatar with its business power, Al Jazeera, and unlimited natural gas resources—these reactionary powers began to challenge the U.S. and its allies for primacy.

On the eve of the revolutions in the Tunisia and Egypt, the forces of reaction were on the move and feeling their oats. The United States would soon be leaving Iraq. Hezbollah had consolidated de facto control of the Lebanese state through a blocking minority in state institutions. Syria had been rehabilitated from the Bush administration's international isolation. Iran was under pressure, but had survived both another round of sanctions and an internal uprising. Turkey, following a policy of neo-Ottomanism, was beginning to exercise its new found diplomatic muscle.

Many of us thought that this uneasy disequilibrium would be shattered by another regional war, likely launched by Hezbollah against Israel which, unlike the first Israeli-Lebanon War of 2006, would spark a regional conflagration that would include Syria at the very least and possibly Iran, with destabilizing implications for the entire world.

Instead, a third force was building that analysts failed to identify. This force was exemplified in the fall of Saddam Hussein from power and his subsequent trial; the success of a people power movement in Lebanon to push Syria from the country; the partial liberalization of the media and even politics in certain countries across the region, including Bahrain and Egypt; the new found power of Arab satellite stations; and an

American policy that, for a critical period, prioritized a freedom agenda. All were ingredients, if not a recipe, for translating a rising demand for greater political and economic opportunity into real change. Moreover, below anyone's radar, a critical mass of young people was being socialized online and experienced freedom through this developing platform. Their experience caused them to wonder why they tolerated the stupid reality surrounding them, a reality in which they couldn't dress the way they wanted, talk to the people they wanted to talk with, or have any input on political decisions that shaped their lives.

Instead of a war, then, the frustrations associated with a lack of human dignity and a desire for change ignited the exceedingly dry tinder of grievance in a small town in the interior of Tunisia. That spark led to the popular revolts and revolutions we are witnessing today. These popular revolutions have almost nothing to do with the U.S. or with the geopolitics I previously discussed, but they will similarly and dramatically impact how the broader geopolitical drama plays out.

The revolutions that took place and are taking place create new opportunities for the United States, but also dangers. On the whole, I would say that there is much more to celebrate than to fear. The transitions in Tunisia and Egypt, for instance, will be rocky in the short-term, but as I heard from a number of prominent businessmen in Egypt last week, the people are bullish about the future of their countries in the long-term for reasons we can discuss. There will be very real short-term challenges in stabilizing the economy and securing the Sinai region, for instance. A democratic Egypt may also not see eye to eye with the U.S. or Israel about the blockade on Gaza or about other traditional aspects of policy. So far, however, no one I spoke with on my last trip advocated or believed that Egypt would abrogate the peace treaty with Israel or envisioned a war with Israel.

In the new Egypt, I experienced a renewed confidence and pride, something I have never felt in all the times I have visited in the past. For the most part, there is a democratic spirit that pervades the country. If it is institutionalized in the new Egyptian state, a democratic Egypt that respects human and political rights, including religious freedom, is an Egypt that will make a stronger partner than the declining Mubarak regime we were dealing with over the past ten years. The "if" in the previous sentence is a big one, especially with newly empowered Salafist movements gaining ground. Still, as I departed Cairo, I left feeling a measured optimism that the Egyptians will successfully navigate their political transition if supported in the right ways by the United States and other friends.

As for Tunisia, there is no doubt in my mind that the Tunisians will be the first to successfully transition to a true representative democracy in the Arab world. Even in Libya, where an anti-Qaddafi future has not yet been secured, I believe the small population coupled with the wealth of the country will create opportunities for a positive outcome.

Taken together, the developments in North Africa, especially if Egypt succeeds in its transition, will transform the rest of the region. Egypt's population, strategic location and

traditional role practically guarantee it. Already, the threat of success has altered the dynamics of the political competition between status quo and anti-status quo powers. Egypt has been temporarily removed from the regional equation and will remain preoccupied with internal politics for the near future. Syria is now under remarkable internal pressure and can only resort to violence in attempt to salvage the regime. Hezbollah and Hamas are equally unsure of how to proceed and are trying to assess how they will be impacted by the developments of the past months. The prospect of successful democratic revolutions is also posing challenges to Iran.

Since Iran's primary influence in the region derives from its soft power and its legacy of revolutionary rhetoric, the prospect of newly emergent democratic governments in key places like Egypt are anathema. If successful, such political transitions will rob Iran's propagandistic tools of much of their remaining power, undermining state legitimacy in the process. If democracy succeeds in marginalizing Islamist political ideology, for example, Iran's theocratic pretensions will be similarly marginalized over time. As we have already seen in Egypt and Tunisia, anti-Americanism and a fixation on the Palestinian conflict, the twin diets of Iranian television, have been subsumed completely by a new found preoccupation with domestic affairs and practical concerns. Clearly, the implications of successful democratic transitions for the future of Iran's theocracy are profound.

What is true for Iran, however, is also true for Saudi Arabia, another theocracy with pretensions of leading the Islamic world. Since the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an important U.S. ally, this is fast emerging as a key challenge for the United States at this critical juncture of unprecedented regional change.

Similarly to Iran, a successful democratic transition anywhere in the region presents a real challenge for Riyadh. This might explain the reports in Egypt of Saudi money flowing into the coffers of the Salafiyun and the Muslim Brotherhood in advance of the coming Egyptian parliamentary elections. In my view, the bigger challenge is the different prisms through which the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia perceive developments in the region. For the United States, the changes being wrought in the region come as a consequence of legitimate grievances than have built up over years of poor governance and are being expressed through unstoppable popular protests. The mantra of the Bush years of "evolution to avoid revolution" went unheeded and we are now reaping the results.

For the Saudis, however, there is an absolute paranoia surrounding the Shia, who they believe are being supported wholly by the revolutionaries in Tehran. They hear Iranian propaganda about the Egyptian revolution being a continuation of Iran's revolution as truth. It is for this reason that the Saudis have pressured the King of Bahrain and bankrolled the hard-liners within the Khalifa family to guarantee that Bahraini Shia demands are in no way met.

The Saudis risk creating a self-fulfilling prophecy which will be wholly negative for U.S. interests in the region. By urging the King of Bahrain to crush the uprising there, the government of Saudi Arabia has handed Iran, Hezbollah, and other Shia reactionaries, such as Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr, a new rallying cry. The Saudis are increasing public

pressure on the government of Iraq, for example, which provides Hezbollah with a welcome distraction at a time when its patron in Damascus is under pressure. Clearly, the vehement anti-Shia rhetoric and violence used against Bahrian's Shia in recent weeks is contributing to the radicalization of Shia across the region who, until Saudi troops rolled across the causeway, were content to be Iraqi, Kuwaiti, Yemeni, Saudi or Bahraini.

Ultimately, in my view, the forest fire that has been burning will continue to spread and no fire break of money alone will stop it. For this reason, it is critical that the United States convince Riyadh in some way that the focus should be on managing change rather than trying to stop or roll it back. Constitutional monarchies in Jordan, Bahrain and elsewhere can be tolerated and should even be considered enviable end states.

Going forward, American interests in the region will remain rather consistent with the past, but the environment in which we try to advance them will be radically different, for both good and ill. As my remarks hopefully make clear, the key to successfully managing the political transitions across the region lies in Egypt and, to a lesser extent (but no less critical), Tunisia. In my view, it is of utmost importance that the United States do everything it can to help Egypt and Tunisia consolidate their democratic transitions since their relatively successful transitions are necessary to create a strong foundation for a new relationship with the region.

Doing so will require creativity, resources, and intestinal fortitude to weather the ups and downs of these countries' domestic politics over the next two or so years. The Muslim Brotherhood—in some political guise—will play a role in the respective elections that are quickly approaching. How big a role the MB will play remains unclear, but the United States will have to strike a wise balance between, on the one hand, being alive to the dangers that the Brotherhood and its allies pose to critical U.S. interests and, on the other hand, providing the Brotherhood with a political gift through lightning-rod statements or actions that could motivate voters otherwise indifferent to the Brotherhood's message to support the movement. Privately, the Administration should engage with the Supreme Military Council in Egypt concerning elements of the political transition that might inadvertently abet the Islamist current's political prospects.

Publicly, it is important for the Administration to send a clear message to the political elite and voting publics in Egypt and Tunisia that we support transitions producing governments that show, through action, their commitment to the universal freedoms of speech, assembly, thought, and religion, and to a free press; that encourage religious liberty and practice and enforce religious tolerance for all minorities; that support the rights of people to communicate freely, including through the internet, without interference; and that combat extremism in all its forms, including those based on religion. In the case of Egypt, we must clearly state that we also support a government that fulfills its international obligations.

It is also important for the Administration to act now to create incentives encouraging Egyptians and Tunisians to choose the sort of leadership with whom we can build new and lasting relationships. In the case of Egypt, such incentives might include opening negotiations for a free trade agreement and the expansion of the QIZ program. For both governments, an early loan collateralized by seized assets of the ancien regime could be a

compelling incentive. In addition, the United States should dramatically expand financial support to traditional democracy promotion NGOs such as the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute through either the Middle East Partnership Initiative or USAID. The United States should also look to help consolidate democracy through new media tools that could, for instance, safeguard the electoral process or assist in capturing and remembering the legacy of the revolutions.

At the same time, if the United States is to fundamentally leverage the changes taking place in the region in order to secure its interests, the Obama Administration must find a way to reinvigorate the Green Movement in Iran. In April 2009, the Obama Administration missed a golden opportunity to support a similar revolution to the one that swept Hosni Mubarak from power in 2011 because it was convinced doing so would risk its efforts to broker a nuclear deal with Iran. This was a historic, strategic mistake, but it has a second chance. As I elaborated earlier, I strongly believe that the Arab revolutions of 2011 pose an insurmountable challenge to Iran's regime, but accelerating the impact will require a comprehensive strategy. Forging such a strategy and pursuing it aggressively, however, will do little to calm Saudi Arabia, whose greatest nightmare is a democratic Iran that becomes a strong ally of the United States.

United States House of Representatives  
Committee on Foreign Affairs

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