

**The Honorable Steve Chabot, Chairman
Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia**

**“Shifting Sands: Political Transitions in the Middle East, Part 2”
May 5, 2011**

I want to welcome all of my colleagues to this hearing of the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia. This hearing was called to assess the current trajectory of the political transitions in the Middle East and to examine U.S. policy towards the region as it stands today.

For the past four months the world has witnessed unprecedented changes throughout the Middle East and North Africa. The peaceful protests that began at the end of last year continue to shake the region to its core. The power structures that have defined the region for decades continue to crumble as protestors take to the streets by the thousands. Unlike in the past, however, they were not protesting against the United States nor were they protesting against Israel. Instead they were protesting for their own God-given human and universal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

This unrest, however, has not been without its challenges. Across the region, from Libya to Yemen, entrenched regimes have sought to maintain their stranglehold on power by any means necessary. In Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh supported and then rejected an agreement to step down from power. In Syria, Bashar al-Assad’s ongoing and ruthless murder of peaceful protesters has already claimed the lives of hundreds of Syrian citizens. In Bahrain, the government’s targeted crackdown has resulted in the indiscriminate imprisonment of swaths of the country’s Shiite population. Most recently a Bahraini military court in a closed-door trial sentenced four protestors to be executed.

Syria is particularly a cause for concern. To date, the Obama Administration’s response to the brutal crackdown in Syria has been tepid and disappointing. The few messages that have been sent have been mixed at best and it does not appear that the Administration has any Syria policy beyond engagement. The Administration has implemented symbolic but largely ineffective sanctions, including against several members of the regime, not including Bashar al-Assad himself. Indeed, the best description of the Administration’s approach to date was actually made by one of President Obama’s advisors who said of Libya that the president is “leading from behind.”

It is unclear why the Administration has not taken a stronger stance against a regime that, if it were to fall, could significantly alter the strategic landscape of the region. Although many questions remain about what government would follow the Assad regime were it to fall, there are many steps that the U.S. could be taking at this time to influence that outcome. The half-committed approach that the Administration has taken to date, however, does not make sense in

any circumstance and risks squandering a huge strategic opportunity for the U.S., not to mention helping to end the bloodshed that intensifies every day.

Another recent development should give all of us reason for great concern. I returned earlier this week from a visit to Israel, Jordan, and Egypt and, while in Israel, the news broke that Hamas had signed a reconciliation deal with Fatah. I was, in fact, discussing with Palestinian Prime Minister Fayyad his tremendously important state building efforts when the deal was likely signed. Shortly thereafter, I had the opportunity to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu who expressed grave concern both for Israel's security as well as for the prospects for peace. How, he asked us, could the Palestinians be serious partners for peace if they welcomed into their ranks vicious terrorists who continue to deny the very right of the State of Israel to exist? His concern is more than justified.

I was deeply disturbed to learn just this morning that at a meeting in Rome on the situation in Libya, Secretary Clinton did not rule out the prospect of negotiations with an entity which may include Hamas. I find this shocking, especially in light of what she said on the same subject as a Senator:

“We're withholding money from the Hamas government, which I think is absolutely appropriate, and we're trying to ensure that no country gives any funding to the Hamas government unless and until they renounce violence and accept Israel's right to exist.”

I sincerely hope that the Obama Administration is not even considering negotiating with Hamas, or with any government in which it is a partner, until or unless it meets the principles laid out by the Quartet in 2006. We must insist that it meet these principles before their role—however small—is legitimized. I look forward to hearing the witnesses clarify U.S. policy towards Palestinian reconciliation.

While the details of the Hamas-Fatah agreement have yet to emerge, I hope that in contrast to what I fear, the Palestinian leadership will proceed on a path to responsible state-building and forgo the tired path of rejectionism.