



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“Popular Uprisings in the Middle East: The Implications for U.S. Policy”
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Dirksen Senate Office Building, Room 419
Thursday, March 17th, 10:00 AM

On Thursday, the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations held a hearing on the implications of uprisings in the Middle East has on U.S. policy. The Committee—chaired by Senator **John Kerry** (D-MA) – with ranking member Senator **Dick Lugar** (R-IN) in attendance –requested the testimony of **William J. Burns**, Under Secretary for Political Affairs.

Senator **John Kerry** opened by stating that the world has seen inspiring and troubling events taking place in the Arab world that have large impacts on U.S foreign policy: “These uprisings constitute one of the most momentous developments of our time. They also present an enormous challenges [...] How we respond today, right now, will shape our strategic position in the Middle East—and how Muslims around the world see us—for decades to come.” He stated that if the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia to lasting democracy then **“the new Arab awakening will carry a vital message: that ordinary people everywhere can determine for themselves how they are governed.”** As such, he noted, the United States has a strategic interest in making sure this transition succeeds. **He called for supporting the transitions the same way that the U.S. supported transitions in Eastern Europe following the collapse of the Berlin Wall with the passage of an aid package similar to the [SEED Act](#).** Kerry also called for a **readjustment in U.S. policy for the region that for too long we ignored human rights and democracy issues due to our addiction to foreign oil and are perceived need for dictators as bulwarks against extremism and terrorism.** He stated that while our approach will vary country to country, we must stand up against “the consolidation of power that has bred economic stagnation, corruption, and popular dissatisfaction” and “encourage the establishment of institutions that translate the will of the people into action, that promote transparency and accountability from leaders, and that safeguard freedom and justice for all.”

On Libya, the senator stated that the international community can no longer watch from the sidelines as the Libyan people’s democratic desires are met with violence. He called on the Security Council to act “now, today” to craft a range of option necessary to prevent humanitarian disaster and stated that Gadhafi has no legitimacy to govern and that he believes the Libyan people will ultimately prevail. He also urged political dialogue in Bahrain to take place as well.

Senator **Dick Lugar** stated that while dramatic change has already taken place in the region, but we are only at the very beginning of a long process. Lugar noted that how these movements coalesce and how the governments react will affect US policy for decades to come. He called for U.S. response to reflect the reality that these revolutions are not about us and that there are thus limits to what the U.S.’s role should be in the region, especially when it comes to potential military involvement. He noted that a no-fly zone risks American military intervention and the perception of that on the Arab streets could have consequences that must be considered. Additionally, he noted the budget constraints in the United States, especially during this period when we still have troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. He called on the administration not to enter into any sort of military engagement in Libya without discussing it with Congress beforehand.

Speaking on Tunisia, Lugar stated that they have made remarkable contributions to refugees from Libya and deserve our economic support. He also expressed his concern over the situation in Bahrain and noted that Saudi troops have entered to protect their vital infrastructure and also noted the importance of Bahrain not only as home to the fifth fleet of the navy, but also as an important ally in the Gulf. Lugar also expressed concern over what unrest in Yemen could mean for extremist groups there.

William J. Burns began his [testimony](#) by stating that this is a profound transformation in the region that is as consequential for the Middle East as the 1989 collapse of the Berlin Wall was for Europe, noting **that this moment presents a great opportunity as the “peaceful, homegrown, non-ideological movement” represents a powerful repudiation of “al-Qaeda’s false narrative that violence and extremism are the only ways to effect change.”** He stated, however, that this moment is also one of great risk, as “there is nothing automatic or foreordained about the success of such transitions. Helping to get them right is as important a challenge for American foreign policy as any we have faced since the end of the Cold War.” He noted that these revolutions are not about us but about the people’s desire for better governance, economic opportunity, and desire to erase “the disconnect between governments and the people.” He also noted the importance of communication technology and the internet in stripping governments on their monopoly of information and providing space for groups to mobilize and organize.

Burns also stated that, **“Political systems and leaderships that fail to respond to the legitimate aspirations of their people become more brittle, not more stable. Popular pressures to realize universal values will take different shapes in different societies, but no society is immune from them. Political systems are a little like bicycles – unless they’re peddled forward, they tend to fall over.”** He noted thus, that we must be prepared for the speed bumps that may come in the short term to prevent authoritarian retrenchment. **Burns also stated that it is in our strategic interest to continue to support the formation of democratic institutions and the democratic process even if that means that the elections will produce “uncomfortable results.”** Discussing, how to help countries move forward, Burns announced that there are **four main elements of U.S. foreign policy towards the Middle East.** First, the U.S. must **support peaceful democratic change** through direct assistance and urging political reform, national dialogue, and citizen engagement. Secondly, the U.S. must **support economic modernization** through direct economic assistance and by working with allies to promote regional trade agreements. He also stated that Secretary of State **Hillary Clinton** announced that the Overseas Private Investment Corporation will provide up to \$2 billion to stimulate private sector investments in the region. Third, he stated that the government will renew its **commitment to a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace** as the status quo between Arabs and Israelis is no longer sustainable. Fourth, he stated, we must **commit to regional security** by strengthening ties to GCC countries, fight terrorism, and prevent Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons.

In response to Senator **John Kerry**’s question on the progress that’s taken place in Egypt under the Supreme Military Council (SMC), Burns noted that the progress is remarkable, pointing to the disbanding of the state security apparatus, the new amendments drafted and the referendum set to take place this weekend. Burns discussed how the SMC seems to recognize the number of challenges before them and are continuing to debate and discuss the election timetable. Kerry stated that it will be an issue he will raise with Egyptian leadership when he travels there this weekend, stating that he believes it will be best to have presidential elections prior to parliamentary ones. Kerry also questioned the role of civil society in Egypt, to which Burns replied that the people are seizing this opportunity with great enthusiasm and are optimistic about the possibilities for Egypt.

On Bahrain, Burns addressed questions by Senator Kerry on the national dialogue, stating that the U.S. supports initiatives to engage in dialogue and urge both sides to restrain from violence and take part. He stated that the situation in Bahrain requires a political solution as it is the only way the Bahraini people’s aspirations can be addressed. He also stated that in their discussions with Saudi and GCC government officials, the State Department has expressed the need to create an environment for reform and dialogue and to restrain from violence.

Addressing Senator **Bob Casey** (D-PA)’s questions on supporting opposition in Iran, Burns stated that the State Department is working hard to implement sanctions on officials and is making full use of all laws. He noted that we have already seen the sanctions’ impact on Iran’s energy sector and economy. He also expressed his distaste for the Iranian government’s hypocrisy in congratulating protesters throughout the region while suppressing its own. Senators **Bob Casey** and **Robert Menendez** (D-NJ) also noted Iran’s influence over Hezbollah in Lebanon and questioned how the Department is going to ensure that funds going to the Lebanese Armed Forces will not actually fund Hezbollah’s operations. Burns stated that there are a number of safeguards and checks in place now to make sure weapons, funds, and training exercises are being used and deployed properly. He also stated that following the

formation of Mikati's national unity government, the U.S. will reassess our aid in light of that government's actions.

Addressing a question from Senator **Benjamin Cardin** (D-MD) on the impact of these uprisings on Israel, Burns noted that Egypt's military council is committed to its treaty with Israel as was seen with the deployment of military troops to the Gaza border to ensure security. Burns also addressed Cardin's concerns that we are not adequately making clear that U.S. aid to the region should not be used against citizens but rather should be used to enhance our strategic interests in the region, especially in regard to Israel. Cardin also called on the State Department to engage the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Mediterranean Program in aiding our efforts to support the democratic transitions in the Middle East.

Responding to Senators **Bob Corker** (R-TN), **Jim Webb** (D-VA) and **John Kerry** (D-MA)'s questions on what sense the State Department has about the opposition in Libya following Clinton's meetings with Libyan opposition leaders in France, **Burns stated that he and other officials have been impressed by the seriousness and commitment of the transitional national council members to building a stable, secular, democratic system in Libya.** He also stated that they recognize that the only way they can achieve this is if they have external help. Senators Corker and Webb also asked about the possibility of extremists coming into the country to which Burns stated that there are risks of extremists coming in and trying to take advantage of the situation and while the U.S. notes the risks, there are also high risks associated with Gadhafi remaining in power. He expressed concern that if Gadhafi remains, he will support extremism in the region and attempt to stir up turmoil in the already unstable region.

Addressing a question from Senator **Bob Corker**, Burns stated that he believes that the Libyan people have the same democratic aspirations as those in Egypt and Tunisia, and that protests began to address issues of economic opportunity and over governance issues. Following on this line of thought, Senator **Robert Menendez** stated that he believes we are missing an opportunity in Libya to help shape events and called for the implementation of a no-fly zone, to jam Gadhafi's radio signals, and to use the \$32 billion of Gadhafi's frozen assets to provide humanitarian assistance to fleeing Libyans. Burns stated that all these steps are being discussed at the Security Council taking place in New York and that the U.S. supports all measures—short of troops on the ground—that could be taken to address the very real dangers. **Senator Menendez** also called for continued investigation on Gadhafi's involvement in the Lockerbie bombing.

Senators **Bob Corker** and **Marco Rubio** (R-FL) expressed their concern that the U.N. Security Council's resolution would not pass due to Chinese and Russian opposition. Senator Rubio questioned what impact U.S. "inaction" has had on our image abroad. Burns responded by stating that the U.S. understands what is at stake in the Middle East and is working with the international community to take action in Libya. Rubio expressed his concern that U.S. inaction and reliance on China and Russia is delivering a negative message to democracy activists across the world, especially those in Iran, that that the U.S. does not support their aspirations. Burns responded by stating that he is optimistic that the resolution will pass and after being pressed further by Rubio stated that the U.S. will look to implement sanctions on Libya if the resolution fails.

Senator **Dick Lugar** expressed his concern about U.S. military involvement in Libya especially given that President **Barack Obama** has not explained to the American people what our strategic interest in Libya is. **Senators Dick Lugar, Bob Corker, and Jim Webb** also called on the Administration to allow Congress to determine U.S. military involvement in the country given the current budget constraints, uncertainty to success of a no-fly zone at this point, possible violations of international law, and the potential for the military to become further involved in the country. Burns responded by stating that the U.S. and the international community are concerned about a possible humanitarian crisis in the country and noted the unprecedented step taken by the Arab League and the United Nations Security Council to end impunity for dictators. He stated the main concern is to protect the civilians who have called for international support. **Burns also noted that the United States will be "extraordinarily careful" about how we approach the situation and be humble in noting the real impact of our involvement.**

Addressing a question from Senator **Jim Webb**, Burns stated that we have suspended diplomatic operations in Libya and their embassy's operations in the United States, but has not formally broken diplomatic relations. However, he noted that the U.S. has invited the transitional national council to open an office here in the states. **Senators Webb and Lugar** expressed concern that not breaking relations will hinder our operations moving forward.

Senator **John Kerry** (D-MA) noted that the United States did not break diplomatic relations with Serbia or have a formal declaration of war prior to U.S. involvement in Kosovo. Additionally, he noted that President **Ronald Reagan** did not receive permission from Congress prior to bombing Libya. He stated that while he believes it is better to proceed with the authorization of Congress, there is not always the opportunity to do so. He also stated that no one is calling for occupation or unilateral action. He also stated that he recalls the euphoria associated with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and noted the important role the U.S. played in the democratic transitions in Eastern Europe and pointed to the different paths taken by Egypt and Turkey. **He stated that supporting the democratic transitions and aspirations of the people in the region is an important part of the War on Terrorism. He called on President Obama to articulate the importance of U.S. support in this critical moment to the American people.**

Senator **Dick Lugar** also called on Obama to articulate the importance of these revolutions on our national security objectives to the American people. He also stated the debate which has taken place during the hearing points to the need for congressional authorization of U.S. involvement in Libya. Additionally, he noted how the situation in Libya is a bi-partisan issue with members from both sides of the aisle both opposing and supporting the issue and that a congressional debate would be healthy for domestic politics, noting the partisan conflict and divisions over the budget.