

**Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Joan Polaschik's Opening Statement for
the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Near East, South Asia,
Central Asia, and Counterterrorism**

December 6, 2017

Promoting Political Stability and Countering Terrorism in North Africa

Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Kaine, Subcommittee Members, thank you for your invitation to discuss U.S. efforts to promote political stability and counter terrorism in North Africa. As Ambassador Sales just described, ISIS and other terrorist groups have been significantly degraded in this region. Nevertheless, these groups continue to capitalize on political friction, economic frustrations, and regional fragmentation in their quest to attract new recruits, destabilize our partner governments, and threaten attacks against U.S. interests and our partners in Africa and Europe.

As an integral component of our counterterrorism efforts, the United States is working closely with our partners in North Africa as they seek to advance political reconciliation, promote economic reforms, and strengthen civil society to ensure a robust and comprehensive approach to the threats we collectively face in this region.

In Libya, our objective is a stable, unified Libya capable of working collaboratively with the United States and our international partners against terrorism and fostering security and prosperity for the Libyan people.

Prime Minister al-Sarraj and his Government of National Accord (GNA) have been stalwart partners in these efforts. We also commend the tireless diplomacy of UN Special Representative Ghassan Salamé to resolve this conflict and achieve a political solution.

Turning first to Libya – where the ongoing political crisis continues to impact security throughout the region – that country must overcome the current political impasse to achieve lasting stability. That is why the President, Secretary Tillerson, and other senior U.S. officials hosted Prime Minister al-Sarraj in Washington over the past week to reaffirm support for UN-facilitated efforts to mediate a political settlement and help Libya prepare for national elections in 2018. As the UN Security Council recently affirmed, the Libyan Political Agreement must remain the framework for a political solution to the conflict and peaceful transition. We urge all Libyans, including “Libyan National Army” Commander Haftar, to engage constructively in this UN process and pursue their ambitions through the ballot box. Any attempts to impose a military solution will only fuel a renewed civil conflict, providing ISIS and Al Qaida with opportunities to again use Libya as a base to threaten the United States and our allies.

In 2016, forces aligned with Prime Minister Sarraj and the GNA expelled ISIS from Sirte, dealing a significant blow to what was the most significant ISIS presence outside of its core in Syria and Iraq. Today, in parallel with ongoing military efforts to ensure ISIS cannot regroup in central Libya, we are helping Libyan authorities consolidate these gains through targeted stabilization programs, such as training for Libyan personnel on the safe removal of explosive remnants of war that ISIS fighters left behind. As communities liberated from ISIS control rebuild, we will encourage the Libyan government to expand economic opportunities, restore health and other basic services, and promote inclusive governance, steps that are critical to fill the gaps in weakly governed areas of the country that ISIS exploited in 2015 to gain a foothold in Libya.

The potential for greater instability in Libya is of particular concern to neighboring Tunisia. As Tunisia consolidates its remarkable democratic transition, a complex web of interrelated factors have spurred radicalization and prompted approximately 3,000 to 6,000 Tunisians to join ISIS: chronic youth unemployment and economic stagnation, feelings of social marginalization, and terrorist recruitment techniques honed to highly localized grievances. U.S. diplomatic efforts and assistance programs are accordingly focused on supporting Tunisia's efforts to reorient its security efforts to respond to this threat; bolstering Tunisian judicial capacity to investigate, prosecute, and incarcerate those involved in terrorism cases; and tackling the root political and economic causes of the foreign terrorist fighter phenomenon. Recent polling by the International Republican Institute suggests further reason for concern: nearly 90 percent of Tunisians claimed that corruption is now worse than under the Ben Ali dictatorship, and roughly half of Tunisia's young people aspire to emigrate, legally or not, to Europe.

Six years after the Jasmine Revolution set the Middle East ablaze, economic opportunities have often lagged behind the unprecedented openings for free political expression. Prime Minister Chahed and his government have outlined encouraging plans to shift this trajectory through greater economic inclusion, a revitalized private sector, and a stronger and more effective judiciary. Certain reforms, including cuts to public sector wages, will be painful in the short term, and further test Tunisia's political and societal cohesion. We support Tunisia's continued progress with the IMF to promote macroeconomic stability, curtail public expenditure growth, and promote budget transparency. The United States will provide targeted assistance to build capacity, increase economic literacy, and strengthen Tunisia's still fragile institutions, but the fundamental responsibility for

ensuring Tunisia weathers its current economic challenges will rest with the Tunisian people and their elected leaders.

In Tunis last month, Deputy Secretary Sullivan spoke directly with Tunisian leaders about these challenges, pledging U.S. support but urging quicker implementation of reforms vital to ensuring all Tunisians are able to participate fully in both political and economic life. Policies that enable private sector-led job creation, spur innovation, and empower civil society groups to hold their government accountable will address the very grievances that terrorists seek to exploit to attract young Tunisians to their vile cause.

Algeria, where I recently served as U.S. Ambassador, has witnessed a dramatic improvement in its political, economic, and security situation since the “dark decade” of the 1990s. Today, Algeria stands as a highly effective counterterrorism partner in the region, both able to deny terrorists safe haven within its borders and, increasingly, export its best practices to more fragile states across Central Africa and the Sahel.

A measured but effective political and economic liberalization in recent years has undergirded this transformation. Since 2011, the Algerian government has adopted a path of gradual political reform: lifting a state of emergency in place for nearly two decades, enhancing the role of the parliament, re-instating presidential term limits, and creating an independent electoral commission. Last month, Algerians peacefully went to the polls to elect municipal governments. Encouragingly, the Algerian government also recognizes that economic reforms and a greater openness to foreign investment are critical ingredients for its lasting stability. As the country seeks to adapt to persistently low oil prices, the parliament has begun

to rein in public subsidies and boost taxes, unpopular but necessary steps to stabilize the Algerian economy. Onerous import restrictions, however, continue to limit Algeria's competitiveness and dampen prospects to knit Algeria more closely to the international community.

Morocco continues to distinguish itself as a capable security partner and regional leader, particularly with respect to countering violent extremism and radicalization on the African continent. Morocco is a net exporter of security. For example, in close cooperation with us, Moroccan personnel have trained counterterrorism forces in Senegal and Chad, while Morocco has lent powerful support to the G-5 Sahel Joint Force Initiative to strengthen the regional response to terrorism.

At home, a persistent, small-scale protest movement has highlighted the intersection of political instability and counterterrorism. In response to the tragic death of a fish vendor last year in a confrontation with local authorities, Moroccans in an underdeveloped northern region have demanded greater investment in their region, more help creating jobs, and fairer treatment by security forces. We are encouraged that Moroccan leaders have begun to respond to these economic concerns, easing political tensions and denying terrorists the chance to exploit grievances to recruit new members.

Finally, six years after Tahrir Square and three years after President al-Sisi's election, Egypt remains an important strategic partner facing a number of challenges. Its most pressing internal security challenge is the ISIS affiliate in Northern Sinai; let me pause for a moment to reiterate the U.S. government's deepest condolences for the horrifying November 24 mosque attack, which killed over 300 Egyptian citizens. ISIS has not yet claimed responsibility for the attack,

the worst in modern Egyptian history, but we are confident ISIS was responsible. We have seen reports of ISIS flags at the scene. ISIS has also targeted Egypt's Christians, killing more than one hundred over the last year, including by appalling church bombings and attacks on Christian pilgrims, and by efforts to drive Christians out of the Sinai Peninsula. In addition to ISIS' campaign in Sinai, other terrorist groups have also claimed attacks on Egyptian officials and police outside of the Sinai, and many of the above-mentioned attacks on Christians have taken place in mainland Egypt. In October, militants killed numerous Egyptian police officers in an attack in the Western Desert region.

Egypt's 750-mile border with Libya represents an additional security challenge. For Cairo, instability in Libya and the potential for ISIS to regroup in Libya represent critical threats to Egyptian security.

We remain committed to supporting Egypt's efforts to defeat terrorist threats. Building on decades of strong security ties, we are seeing growing counterterrorism cooperation, and continuing strong military-to-military efforts across a range of programs. We conducted the first Bright Star joint military exercise in eight years, with a new focus on contemporary, asymmetric threats. U.S.-origin equipment, for example mine-resistant vehicles, contributes daily to the Egyptian Armed Forces' ability to effectively confront the challenges.

I want to turn briefly to economic stability. President al-Sisi and his government have taken bold and necessary steps on economic reforms supported by the United States and the international community, and the economy is improving, albeit slowly. These reforms have included floating the currency, introducing a Value Added Tax and reducing fuel subsidies, and expanding social spending to support

the less fortunate. Egypt is committed to continue reducing its deficit and making structural reforms to improve the business environment and spur investment. These steps to strengthen the Egyptian economy are extremely important to promoting Egypt's long-term stability.

We will continue to emphasize with our Egyptian government interlocutors the importance of a comprehensive approach to counterterrorism that protects and minimizes damage to civilian populations. We have been engaged in a frank, but as-yet inconclusive, dialogue about Egypt's restrictive NGO law, and Egypt's conviction of employees of U.S. NGOs. We have raised – and will continue to raise at senior levels – our concerns about policies that challenge democratic governance, and continue to stress the fundamental importance of the respect for human rights, civil liberties, and the need for a robust civil society.

Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Kaine, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about ongoing efforts in North Africa to promote political and economic stability in order to achieve a lasting victory against terrorism in this complex region. I look forward to answering your questions.

Thank you.