

*Statement of*

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*before the*

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**“Women and the Arab Spring”**

**Washington, DC  
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Thank you Chairwoman Boxer, Chairman Casey, Senators DeMint and Risch and the other members of the Subcommittees for inviting me to speak to you today. I am honored to be here, and commend you for holding this timely and important hearing.

I would like to acknowledge the achievements of the women you have invited to testify in the next panel. Women have been at the forefront of the revolutions across the region, and I am grateful to hear their perspectives.

I am also very honored to be here with Ambassador Melanne Verveer, who is a tenacious and invaluable partner in our efforts to advance women's empowerment and women's inclusion – globally and in the Middle East in particular. She has

already communicated the key point that Secretary Clinton has underscored throughout the Arab Spring – that the full participation of women is an essential ingredient for any democracy.

Therefore, we are committed to championing women’s full participation in the new democracies now emerging, and in the reforms that are underway across the region. The Administration’s whole-of-government approach demonstrates our belief that the women of Egypt, Tunisia and Libya are essential partners in any successful transition.

The democratic transitions underway in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, and the pressures for democratic change across the region, present a great strategic opportunity for the United States, for three reasons.

The first reason is stability, which is crucial to the pursuit of all our longstanding interests in the Middle East. The dramatic events of this spring were driven by deep, underlying trends in Arab societies. As Secretary Clinton noted nearly a year ago, last January in Doha, the status quo in the region was not stable. We have an opportunity now to help promote lasting stability in the Middle East – stability that will only come through democratic and economic reforms that will write a new social contract between governments and citizens.

The second reason we see an opportunity in the events of the Arab Spring is about democracy. As you all know well, where democracy and democratic freedoms are valued, the world also gains in security. Democracies give people a stake in their governance and weaken the appeal of those who call for violence. We see the changes underway in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt as an opportunity to support the emergence of more democratic states, which will be stronger partners for the United States in advancing our shared interests in security, stability, and prosperity for the region and the world.

Finally, we see a strategic opportunity in these events because of the way this change has come about, and who is driving it – the Arab world’s rising generation of young people. The disciplined and determined young men and women who are driving the Arab Spring have put forward a powerful repudiation to the narrative of extremists who preach violence and confrontation as the only means to achieve change. They have also put forward their own indigenously generated, positive vision for the future of the Middle East, a future defined by dignity, freedom and opportunity. We have a keen interest in seeing that positive vision succeed.

The recent announcement of three courageous women receiving the Nobel Peace Prize is the latest affirmation of women's ability to advance human progress and human rights in the region and around the world. As Secretary Clinton noted, the three winners – including one from Yemen – “are shining examples of the difference that women can make and the progress they can help achieve when given the opportunity to make decisions about the future of their societies and countries.” As you may know, one of those Nobel Prize winners, Tawakkul Karman from Yemen, is an alumna of the Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), and also participated in State Department exchange and visitor programs. I met with Tawakkul last week in the State Department, and we discussed the absolute determination of the Yemeni people to see a political transition that is not merely a change of leadership but that ushers in real participation, and real justice for the Yemeni people.

There is no question that this period of transformative change carries with it some anxiety. The fate of the region's democratic movements is uncertain, and in some countries citizens are facing brutality and repression from their governments in response to their legitimate demands. And the democratic transitions now beginning in Tunisia and Egypt and Libya are far from complete. So it's crucial that the United States government stay engaged to support these democratic transitions and democratic reforms across the region. Let me tell you a little bit about what we are doing to further that goal.

The events unfolding in the Middle East are the foreign policy challenge of our time. In response to and in support of these transitions, the U.S. Government has rededicated its efforts to assist the people of the Middle East and North Africa as they create more participatory, prosperous and pluralistic societies. We have realigned our resources to promote democratic and economic reforms across the region and to strengthen those within Arab societies who are advancing change. Many of those civil society leaders, like Tawakkul, are women, and we want to support their efforts.

The Department of State has also created a new Office of Middle East Transitions with Ambassador Bill Taylor at the helm as Coordinator. This office is tasked with ensuring U.S. assistance to transition countries is coordinated and prioritized across all agencies and programs. We know that resources are limited, and that with so much at stake in the region, we need to be efficient and make every dollar count. In addition to my regular duties as the Deputy Assistant Secretary responsible for democratic reform in the Middle East, I now also have the privilege of serving as Deputy Coordinator for this office. So I come to you with a very

clear view of the efforts we are undertaking to support successful democratic transitions in the region at this critical time.

As you know, I supervise the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), which is located in the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. MEPI has had women's empowerment as one of its key priorities since it was first founded in 2002. I'm delighted to have this fantastic program as one of the key tools we are using to support women during the political transitions across the region. Let me speak briefly about some of the efforts we have underway in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya specifically.

### **Tunisia**

As Ambassador Verveer noted, Tunisia's women have a proud history as active participants in their country's political, social, and economic life. When Ben Ali fled Tunisia in January, MEPI mobilized the bulk of our initial US government response to support civil society and election preparation in Tunisia – and in all of that work, women's inclusion and women's participation is a constant theme. Indeed, some of MEPI's longstanding partners in Tunisia, who operated under significant constraints previously, became crucial players in the work of voter education this year. A singular example is CAWTAR, the Center for Arab Women Training and Research. With MEPI support, they are promoting women's rights in Tunisia through media, trainings and public debates.

The American Bar Association is another important MEPI partner in Tunisia in advancing women's political inclusion. Later this year, they will be hosting, with their Tunisian colleagues, a national forum on the role of women in transitional processes focusing on comparative experiences; women's rights in law and constitutional reform; and advocacy for law reform. Participants will include women jurists, rights groups, civil society organizations, and political party representatives, among others.

MEPI is just one program undertaking efforts to support the political, economic and social participation of women in Tunisia. USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives supported a "Get Out and Vote" campaign designed to encourage women of all ages, backgrounds and means, through mainstream and new media channels, to vote and participate in Tunisia's democratic reform process.

The Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) is supporting programming in Tunisia, on transitional justice and independent journalism, including a project to empower women in civil society and media.

## **Egypt**

In Egypt, the United States is working with international as well as Egyptian organizations to ensure that the gains made in women's legal rights before the revolution are not lost, and that women play a central role in the definition of rules and institutions for Egypt's new democracy.

USAID is focusing on women's issues across all its programs in Egypt. USAID is bringing together women-led civil society organizations from all governorates in Egypt to strategize on ways to they can improve women's participation in elections and political parties. These conversations are specifically focused on increasing the participation of women candidates before the upcoming parliamentary elections. During this time of transition, USAID is continuing its crucial work to improve maternal and child health, combat violence against women, and extend equal access to justice and education for women and girls. On the economic front, USAID partners will provide 1,000 new business loans within the next twelve months in Qena, one of the poorest, least served areas of Egypt, to spur job creation and to increase employment opportunities for the poor. Women are slated to receive about 60 percent of these loans.

MEPI is working with Vital Voices to create a network of women activists across the region, and to help Egyptian women's groups develop their priorities for legislative change. MEPI's local Egyptian partner, the Egyptian Association for Community Participation Enhancement, is training younger women as future leaders, and encouraging women to vote in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Other State Department programs assist women who want to compete in the newly open political process. In the past several months, more than 200 women from a diverse array of political parties have taken advantage of US-government-funded training programs, which are offered on a non-partisan basis, and which provide everything from training on how to confidently deliver a stump speech -- to organizational skills that will help them sharpen their party platforms and build campaigns that resonate with voters.

The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor is working with the International Labor Organization to strengthen women's participation in key labor market institutions. This project will help women and employers, along with

government institutions, become more practiced in fundamental labor rights and procedures, giving more women the chance to enter the labor market, and building the capacity of Egyptian businesses to offer decent work to women.

## **Libya**

Since the first days of the revolution, when Libyan women formed sewing circles to create the ubiquitous independence flags, Libyan women have been at the heart of the revolution. Some of the most promising and effective non-profit initiatives have been founded by women leaders. Wafa and Hana Gusbi, twin sisters and previous US Embassy Public Affairs grant recipients, co-founded Wafa Charity Organization. The Gusbis left for Tunis in May 2011 and, utilizing the skills they learned through managing their earlier USG-funded project, they have organized social programs for Libyans living in exile -- serving up to 20,000 hot meals per day to refugees during Ramadan. Now is the time to demonstrate to these women our support for their efforts.

In Libya, we are working through the United Nations Special Mission in Libya to target our assistance to priorities identified by the Libyans themselves. But we have already begun to offer our support to the newly emerging NGOs in Libya and to support those who want to create new political parties to compete in Libya's planned elections. We will continue to focus on ensuring that Libyan women are active beneficiaries of our efforts.

## **Regional**

Our work in these three countries in transition is just one element of our regional focus on empowering women and girls.

Through MEPI, and working with democratic partners around the globe, we continue to promote further progress in women's political, economic, and social participation. Through the Community of Democracies' Working Group on Gender Equality, which Ambassador Verveer co-chairs with the Lithuanians, the United States is taking a leadership role in promoting gender equality and good governance, with a particular focus on the Middle East and North Africa. Under the auspices of the working group, the U.S. is partnering with the Dutch government to conduct dialogues with civil society leaders and academics from

across the region to better understand the priorities of women in transitioning societies and how the United States and the international community can best assist them.

Working with the International Republican Institute, MEPI is supporting the Arab Women's Leadership Institute, which assists women leaders across North Africa to maximize their political gains during periods of transition. In countries undergoing reform or transition, the Leadership Institute is providing female officials currently in office, candidates for office, and civil society leaders with models of good governance and coalition-building to help them realize the reforms their constituents are demanding. In addition, the Institute is giving women civic leaders advocacy skills so they can fight for equal social and political rights for women as their countries define new rules of the road in politics.

The U.S. government is also supporting the Middle East and North Africa Women's Business Forum of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). This group accelerates the development of women's entrepreneurship in the region.

Without a doubt, the final outcome of the region's democratic transition is uncertain. But because we believe that democratic transformation in the Middle East is profoundly in our interests, we are committed to remaining engaged and to providing the necessary long-term support for women in these countries who are already working as agents of positive change. In his May 2011 speech, President Obama said, "History shows that countries are more prosperous and more peaceful when women are empowered." This is a guiding principle for us as we support democratic transitions in the Middle East.

We look forward to working with you, our partners in Congress, to ensure that we can sustain our urgent support the Middle East in this historic moment.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.