Remarks by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton on "The EU Response to the Arab Spring"

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It is a great pleasure to be here in Brookings again and always a pleasure to be in the United States. Having just come from Juba I seem to have brought the weather from South Sudan with me. Thank you all for coming. I thought what I would do is to concentrate a little bit on some of the key issues that are happening in the neighborhood of the European Union, collectively known as the Arab Spring, and then make some comments about how we in the EU are responding. Then I would like to have a conversation with you in the time that we have left.

I want to start with a few words about the relationship between the European Union and the United States, because I think we are at an important moment - a moment when that relationship is changing, and changing for the good. It used to be the case that the United States focused very much on Europe as a place where it was necessary for them to be, to support and deal with problems that were created over the last 50 years. Not least, of course, in the Western Balkans in most recent times.

I have always believed that the EU needs to take more responsibility for what it has to do in its own neighborhood and that as we get better at doing that, our relationship with the US changes to being collaborative partners in solving problems rather than perhaps relying on you.

I say that because sometimes in Europe and sometimes here people question whether there is as much interest from the US in the EU. I think the interest is as great as ever and the amount of traffic between my office and the State Department and my meetings and conversations with the US are endless and consistent and constant. And the reason for that is because we are now working together to try to address different problems. But I say all that in the spirit of knowing how much the United States has meant to the EU and how much we want to keep that strengthened relationship into the future.

So we then turn to our neighborhood. When I became the High Representative, which was a little bit of a shock to me, as you may have read, I said that there were three things that I needed to do in my mandate.

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First, it was to create this new service - the European External Action Service. Essentially it was about bringing politics and economics together in one focal point of the European Union. So the countries, individuals, civil society, people trying to talk to Europe, did not feel that they had to talk to an endless parade of different institutions, but rather that they could talk through one to the European Union.

Secondly, I said we should be judged as the EU by our effectiveness in our own neighborhood. I said that long before the Arab Spring, long before the changes that we have seen in our neighborhood. But I felt it then and I feel it now.

And thirdly, that we needed to develop our strategic partnerships, of which our relationship with the US is perhaps the most obvious, and at times the most important.

When we think about what has happened in our neighborhood, I think we can divide it into three different possible areas of concern. In a sense what happened in Tunisia and then in Egypt, demonstrated the desire of people to deal with their concerns about both the political situation, the corruption they faced, and also the economic challenges and I will say more about that later. The results are yet to be finally determined, but interim governments are trying to move forward towards elections and trying to tackle also the economic problems.

We have countries like Syria and Libya, which are in violence and quite a lot of chaos. In Syria it is very hard to read exactly where that is going to come out, but we stand with the United States and have been very determined to try to get this violence to stop, to stop the internment of thousands of people, and to see Assad really move forward with the dialogue, frankly the results of which have hardly been sorted out as necessary.

And in Libya, to see Kadhafi go and the people of Libya to be able to determine their own future and their own government. I was in Benghazi quite recently to open the EU office in order for us to channel through that office the sort of support that people in Benghazi and across Libya need.

And then my third group, countries that are trying to make the changes without chaos and reform now. The two countries that strike me the most are Morocco and Jordan – incidentally both led by kings and who are trying to find the right kind of economic and political reform to respond to what people are asking for and to what they know needs to happen in their countries politically and economically.

And then at the heart of the region, the Middle East Peace Process, and the needs with which we are trying to deal with this week in Washington in our conversations and discussions within the Quartet to find a way to get the parties back to the negotiating table.

I just mentioned those countries, but I could also mention others, to try to get a sense of the different flavor of what is happening in the region and the way with which we need to approach the needs of people. There are two fundamentally big challenges in all of those countries and they are very familiar challenges for all of us.

The first is the political challenge: How do you build what I describe as a deep democracy. That means thinking beyond the idea of an election as being that great crowning moment, when you put real election to work and elect a government - to building the sort of institutions and the framework you need to make sure that kind of democracy has roots that are long and deep. And that you don’t elect the government just once, but most importantly of all that you have the right to kick them out at the next election.
That means thinking through how we build with them the independent judiciary, how we build the kind of society and civil society that is able to respond to the needs of people and hold the government to account. A particular area that I worry about a lot is how you build the role of the opposition, because in so many countries across the world the winner takes all in the elections, and we don’t have the framework that allows the opposition to hold the government to account and to be, if you like, a government in waiting. And that’s going to be one of the challenge that we have to tackle.

If you talk to people in Egypt, they talk to me sometimes about how they would like a retired President walking around, because as they would say "in 70,000 years nobody has ever retired". And we know how important it is to see that governments come and go and for the politicians to have a shelf life after which they have to retire and return to normal life. And in some countries they have not experienced that in a very long time, if ever.

Equally too finding ways in which we develop for particular groups in the society this capacity to be able to engage. When you look at the Southern Mediterranean and North Africa, you are particularly struck by two groups. First are the young people. The role of young people has been well documented already, but never to be underestimated in terms of what they did and what they continue to do to make the demands for their own political future. And the demands for their freedom and their human rights, and an end to corruption. And to see a way forward in the building of political parties.

And also for women in that part of the world who are particularly concerned to make sure they can take their place in that political space.

Again you can hear some concerns that having participated in the changes and revolutions, they would not like to go back to the role they used to have. Or as important, and this is certainly true when I talk to some of the women in Libya, in Benghazi, that they have no history of being involved in civil society and no knowledge about how to engage and how to encourage other women to engage and feel they can do it. Classic problem of self esteem and feeling this is not for you – this is somehow a man's world. It is a problem that still exists in most countries of the world in my experience, but particularly exists where there has been no traditional history of this at all. So trying to engage and develop the capacity for them in the political party process.

Again one of the challenges where you don’t have political parties that have had time to develop is how to ensure that they too can take root. And that we respect all political parties who are willing to say that we stand for the values of democracy and we stand for fundamental freedoms and human rights. Whoever they are and from whatever tradition they come. We have got to be clear about what we are saying about what we hold dear and what we believe to be very important. It is the challenge of helping them build that and make it deep; it is an ongoing challenge that we very much have to be engaged in. It is interesting for us in the European Union because within the 27 member states we have a number of countries who themselves have been through a revolution and change – who saw walls come down. And you have to find a way to rebuild their democracies and to rebuild their political process and to find ways to do it in deep and enduring manners.

So making sure that the constitutions are in place and support the people and being the guardian of that process on behalf of the people is equally important. And that is something that in particularly Egypt is engaged in now. Building the constitution, supporting the growth of political parties, helping the institutions that make democracy possible come into being and to flourish, knowing that you have an independent judiciary, knowing that you have the civil service and building civil society.
When I first went to Tunisia and met with civil society groups for the first time they were in a room together, they had never been allowed to meet each other before. Building for them is partly to learn how to deal with each other. In Benghazi, when they called a meeting at the local university of people interested in forming organizations, 200 organizations turned up that had formed themselves in the last few weeks, along with 55 newspapers who are now flourishing in Benghazi. Freedom of the media and the press are incredibly important aspects of all the building of the political process.

And then the second challenge is economic – I would argue that democracy will only take root if you also are able to see the potential for economic growth and development. You know the statistics of the levels of unemployment, particularly among young people, and the need to try to develop the economy to support especially the young who want to get jobs and have a future and potential. Alongside that the building of the infrastructure needs to take place to enable all of that to flourish efficiently and I would link that back to also the building the rule of law and justice and so on. The inward investment is only going to come when business feels that they are actually able to flourish in an atmosphere of rule of law that is going to work for them too.

There is a huge amount of work to be done to getting the economy to grow. I think in Egypt tourism is running at 35% - it really is the time to go and see the pyramids. It really is the time to support countries who need that tourism come back and who got the potential to try to deal with the debt that’s building up and really want to get their economy to move. Particular aspect of that for me is about small businesses, the backbone of all the economy. 3% of all small businesses with the EU of 27 countries trade outside the EU. It is a very small figure and if you could double that you could do a lot for the European economy. Imagine too what we could do if you support small and medium sized businesses in the countries in our neighborhood to be able to grow and develop their potential too. As well as building against the backbone of some of their economic needs. Jordan - 52% of the water is lost in the pipeline that brings it to where it needs to go, they have massive infrastructure needs. Cairo - the metro needs to be extended. Tunisia - the road network needs to be built. And there is an ambition in Egypt to have a massive housing programme that will build social housing right across the country, around which you can plan whole communities and sustainable development for people to be able to work and live together in those communities. Including training, education, jobs that will help those communities be sustainable in the long term. So a huge amount needs to be done.

So my final point is about what has Europe done in response to those two big needs. First of all, for Europe this is about whether we are going to be effective or not. To be effective in our neighborhood is the proof of the European Union foreign policy project. I think we have to and we have committed to being there not only just for the short term, but for the medium and the long term because this is a long term job.

We have rewritten our neighborhood policy to build on 3 Ms. Money - getting additional resources into the area, so along with the 5.7 billion Euros we already had, we added another 1.2 billion. Getting other investors, like the European Investment Bank to add another billion Euros a year for the Southern Neighborhood while continuing to support what is needed to be done in the East. And the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development responding to my request, working with others, to add 2 to 2.5 billion a year each year over the next few years in public and private sector investment to get business moving and to get the infrastructure in place. I think as well the building of political parties and building the political process to provide the kind of long term support that will be necessary, and helping them with election observation so that the elections are done properly. Supporting them in security issues - border management, reform of security sector, police reform and so - that are so important as you move into democracy and build confidence in people that they can rely on those institutions to operate on their behalf, supporting their human and fundamental rights as well. And trying to do that in the context of all that big support.
So 3Ms: Money, which I just described. Mobility - offering the support especially for young people and for businesses to take advantage of educational opportunities in the EU, business opportunities in the EU, and supporting them in doing that, recognizing this is a young work force that we are going to need in the European Union in the future. And Market access, the third M – how do we support them through trade to enable them to grow their economies and to get the kind of support they need. Bearing in mind that as their markets grow they provide markets for us. All that within the backdrop of recognizing that if we can support our neighborhood into future, it will be to our advantage as well.

Just one very final comment. We are doing this against an extraordinary difficult economic backdrop, you know that here and we know that in Europe, and it is very important that we send the message very clearly to our people, that it is about foreign policy in their own interest. If we have a good neighborhood that is sustainable and secure, that is democratic and economically growing, that that is to our advantage because we are able to trade with them, to work with them, to support them and to see them as our neighbors into the future. So as I began, Europe should be judged by its ability to operate in its own neighborhood and my determination is to make sure that the judgment is a positive one.