



## THE UN'S RESPONSE TO THE ARAB SPRING AND THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

*Address to UN APPG by Sir Mark Lyall Grant  
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### Introduction

The last 18 months at the UN have been dominated by events in the Middle East and North Africa. Traditionally, the Security Council spends two-thirds of its time on Sub Saharan Africa. But in the last year, the most difficult debates/negotiations have been on Libya, Yemen, Sudan and Syria – not forgetting Israel/Palestine.

I don't need to explain the significance of the Arab Spring to this audience. I want to make only 2 points:

a) Progress will be uneven across the region. Although similar impulses have instigated the uprisings (a mix of a desire for political participation and a demand for economic opportunity) the countries and societies across the region vary enormously in their wealth, traditions, and institutions. Different states are therefore bound to move at different speeds and in different ways. Many countries, such as Libya, are holding elections for the first time ever. Reforms in e.g. Morocco and Jordan will take time. Change may seem barely discernible in some of the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia. Assad in Syria will make every effort to hang on for some time.

b) This means that we need strategic patience. The Arab Spring was always going to be a long process, not a quick fix. These are not our revolutions. We are supporting those struggling for their own freedoms and reforms. We should avoid the temptation to pick champions. There will be many, and sometimes significant, setbacks. But democratisation is rarely linear as experience in Europe, Latin America and Africa has shown.

There is understandable concern about the rise of political Islam. The argument is that autocratic leaders like Mubarak in Egypt, Qadhafi in Libya, Assad in Syria may not have been democrats, but they did keep a lid on religious extremism. Of course, this view does not take into account the threats to international security fostered by those regimes. We should not forget that Qadhafi's Libya sponsored the Pan Am Lockerbie terrorist attack; AQ's new leader Zawahiri is Egyptian; Damascus has long sponsored Hamas and Hezbollah terrorism; AQ operated with impunity in some parts of Saleh's Yemen.

It is true that recent elections in the region have benefited religious parties. The Muslim Brotherhood secured the majority of seats in Egypt's constituent parliament, and the Salafists also won 20%. In Tunisia and Morocco, Islamic parties have come out on top. They are likely to do well in Libya and Yemen as well.

But the inspiration behind the upheavals in the region has come from young people seeking both a greater say in the way they are governed, and more economic opportunities. It is as much a clash of generations as a clash of civilisations. In 1960, Egypt's GDP per head was the same as Korea's – now it is one fifth of the size. The region as a whole needs to create 50 million new jobs by 2020 just to keep pace with the population increase.

The Muslim Brotherhood knows that, if it is to meet Egyptian political and economic expectations, it will need to free up the economy and attract investment from the West. Certainly the next few years will be difficult, with many bumps in the road, but democracy is messy and entails risks. Let's keep our eyes on the strategic trend, which is the opening of political space and a new culture of accountability. This is positive – and I expect it to remain so.

## **The UN's Response**

Events in the Arab world were not widely predicted. But there was one part of the UN system which did identify the risk of upheaval. The UN Development Programme produced a series of reports between 2001 and 2005 analysing the economic, social and demographic strains in the Middle East/ North Africa region and accurately predicting that, unless economic and social reform was accelerated, there would be political, possibly violent, upheaval. But these prescient reports did not lead to political action.

Nonetheless overall, I would argue that the UN's response has been impressive. Politically, the Secretary – General, Ban Ki-moon, saw immediately which side the UN should be on. In February last year, he stood alongside David Cameron in Downing Street and called on the Egyptian Government to respond positively to the demands of those demonstrating in Tahrir Square. Since then, he has made a series of consistent and bold statements on Libya, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain. On that same visit to the UK, Mr. Ban made a powerful speech at Oxford University on humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect. In speaking up like this, he has been prepared to ignore the criticism he has received, not only from those governments he has criticised, but from some major UN member states. The wider UN system also reacted positively. The Human Rights Council suspended Libya, established a commission of inquiry and effectively rejected Syria's candidature for HRC membership. The General Assembly switched accreditation to the Libyan opposition and adopted by an overwhelming majority its first ever Human Rights Resolution on Syria in December.

Most significantly of all, the Security Council referred Libya to the International Criminal Court and adopted wide ranging sanctions in SCR 1970; and then in March 2011 established a no-fly zone and authorised "all necessary means" to protect civilians in SCR 1973.

Together, these constituted the most wide-ranging resolutions passed by the Security Council for more than 20 years. It laid the foundation for a 5 month military campaign conducted by NATO and a coalition of allies, to protect Libyan civilians and led indirectly to the removal of Colonel Qadhafi.

## **UN Backlash**

NATO/Coalition military action to implement SCR 1973 proved a divisive issue in the UN Security Council. Russia and China in particular (but also IBSA) argued that the coalition air attacks went beyond the Security Council mandate, with the objective of regime change, rather than the protection of civilians. Even now, 9 months later, Russia is asking for a UN investigation into civilian casualties caused by NATO.

But these criticisms are unjustified: during the final SC negotiations on 1973, it was made very clear what military measures would be necessary in order to impose a no-fly zone and protect civilians (particularly in Benghazi) from assault by Qadhafi's forces. That was why 5 of the 15 members of the Security Council abstained in the vote. And unlike Qadhafi, NATO was incredibly careful, and very largely successful, in avoiding significant civilian casualties, as the UN Secretary-General has acknowledged.

But the sentiment in the Security Council is still there – and it has made the subsequent debates on Syria, Sudan and Yemen more difficult. In particular, Russia and China twice vetoed Syria resolutions (in October and February), arguing that it was a political stepping stone to military intervention. But the Libya backlash did not paralyse action entirely in the Security Council. On Libya itself, the council has mandated a UN support mission, led by a British national (Ian Martin) which is helping the new Libyan government on security, rule of law and preparation for elections. We have gradually unwound the sanctions imposed last year to free up assets held overseas, thus stimulating a resurgence of the Libyan economy.

The UN has been active elsewhere in the Region too:

- UNDP is assisting Egyptian and Tunisian authorities with elections and constitution writing;
- With Support from the SC, the Secretary-General's advisor (another British national) helped to broker the peace deal in Yemen in November, which led to President Saleh stepping down, new presidential elections and the start of a political transition.
- a further UN peacekeeping operation was mandated in South Sudan to promote stability for the newest member of the community of Nations, and a second peacekeeping force established in the disputed territory of Abyei between Sudan and South Sudan.

And, most encouragingly of all, in the last 2 weeks, the Security Council finally adopted two unanimous resolutions on Syria – which offered full support for Kofi Annan's 6 point plan to bring about a cessation of violence and the start of a political dialogue which could lead to a

political transition in the country; and authorised a UN monitoring mission to help to oversee implementation of the plan. This coming together of the SC on Syria has taken far too long, but is all the more welcome for that.

[There are two areas which the UN has not so far been successful:

- Iran continues to flout a series of UN resolutions demanding that it give up its nuclear weapons programme. Two weeks ago the E3+3 re-engaged Iran in talks about the nuclear issue in Istanbul. If this process fails, the issue will come back again to the Security Council.

- The Middle East peace process is in limbo, waiting for the US election in November. Meanwhile settlement building continues apace in the West Bank, narrowing the window of opportunity for a peaceful two state solution. The Security Council has long been paralysed on this issue. But it will almost certainly come back to the UN (perhaps through a membership in bid in the General Assembly) before the end of the year.]

### **Ban's priorities for his 2<sup>nd</sup> term**

The issues thrown up by the Arab Spring are central to Ban's priorities for his 2<sup>nd</sup> 5-year term, which began in January this year. He has set out 5 main priority areas:

- Building a safer and more secure world, including standing strong on fundamental principles of democracy and human rights;
- Preventing conflicts and disasters;
- Sustainable development;
- Supporting nations in transition;
- Working for women and young people

Behind these 5 headings, he has set out action plans covering e.g. climate change, non-proliferation, CT, disease eradication and disaster relief. And he underlined that all of these priorities should be underpinned by reform of the UN to make it effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The UN agenda covers every global issue except trade, so it is important to focus. We therefore welcome Ban's attempts to set clear priorities, all of which are of course linked.

To underpin his 2<sup>nd</sup> term and the reform agenda, Ban is also looking to strengthen his top management team. He has already brought in two key appointments: Jan Eliasson as Deputy Secretary General and Susana Malcorra as his Chief of Staff. They are both tough, reform minded individuals with strong UN experience.

Security Council Challenges

I want to highlight three particular challenges currently facing the Security Council:

#### a) Peacekeeping

Nature of conflict in recent years has changed, but UN peacekeeping has not sufficiently evolved in response. The threat of inter-state war has not completely disappeared (cf Sudan/South Sudan) but the UN is being asked to deal much more with intra-state conflict and peacebuilding, rather than inter-state conflict. This means that;

- We are probably at the high watermark of total peacekeeping numbers. Rather than the current 100,000, in 5 years time there are likely to be around 60-70,000 peacekeeping troops;
- The type of troops required is changing. There is less need of infantry battalions; and more need for specialist units (e.g. engineering companies) enablers (e.g. helicopters and strategic airlifts) peace and military observers (e.g. for Syria);
- There is also a greater need for specialist civilian advisers, including justice and rule of law experts.
- Whereas the bulk of UN infantry battalions currently comes from developing countries, many of these specialist cadres will need to come, in the first instance at least, from the developed world.
- The focus has expanded from simple security to protection of civilians (which is now central to most peacekeeping operations) security sector reform, peacebuilding and capacity building. This is at the heart of what UN peacekeeping operations will do in the future.

These challenges, as the financial crisis, are testing the peacekeeping partnership between troop contributing countries and financial contributors as never before.

#### b) Responsibility to protect

The Libya backlash has had an impact on the debate around protections of civilians and the responsibility to protect. Countries putting a focus on sovereignty and non-intervention are becoming more vocal. It goes beyond Russia and China, although they are usually the most vocal in the Security Council. It embraces the IBSA countries, Pakistan and the ALBA group headed by Venezuela and Cuba. Brazil has called for a new doctrine “responsibility while protecting”, which, though not incompatible with the responsibility to protect, could be used by some to weaken it. This would be very damaging at a time when UN peacekeeping has moved deliberately over the last few years towards a more robust posture, focused especially around the protection of civilians in internal conflict. But, happily, this non-interventionist narrative is not going unchallenged – and not just by the US and the Europeans. New actors such as Turkey and Qatar have increased their influence as a result

of the Arab Spring. They favour a more activist and interventionist approach to resolving conflict.

### c) Relations with regional organisations

This is probably the most significant strategic challenge facing the Security Council. We have seen big rows in the Security Council over the last 18 months over the relative division of labour between regional sub-regional organisations and the Security Council. The UN charter always envisaged a role for regional conflict resolution, but didn't envisage the development of strong regional organisations. The African Union in particular wants to be given priority in resolving conflicts in Africa. This has caused tension with the Security Council. To cite three recent examples:

- In Somalia and Sudan, new models of peacekeeping operations were devised, specifically to accommodate this tension (AMISOM, UNAMID and UNISFA);
- In Cote d'Ivoire, ECOWAS and the AU took very different positions on the disputed 2011 elections. The Security Council had to choose, and sided with ECOWAS;
- In Libya, the Security Council followed the recommendations of the Arab League, against the wishes of the African Union, in authorising military force.

These tensions are likely to increase in future, rather than diminish.

Of course, there are many wider challenges facing the UN system beyond the Security Council. I will conclude my remarks by mentioning two:

### a) Gender equality, women's empowerment, LGBT rights, sexual and reproductive health

This debate has become more politicised. There have been significant advances in the last 20 years in promoting women's empowerment, sexual and reproductive health and LGBT rights at the UN. The establishment of UN Women in 2010 was a major step forward, bringing together the different UN strands dealing with women's rights and empowerment. But again, there has been a backlash, led by a number of hard-line member states (including Egypt, Iran and Pakistan and some Africans). On some of this agenda, they have been supported by the Holy See and conservative Christian NGOs in the US. A recent example of this polarisation was the failure of the Commission on the Status of Women in March to reach agreed conclusions for the first time since 2004. It will be very important over the next few years that the EU member states and their allies defend the hard won gains on this agenda. The emergence of Islamist Governments from the Arab Spring may make this harder. Civil society has an important advocacy role to play.

### b) Reform agenda

Ban Ki-moon is reform minded. He sees the need to modernise the UN to make it fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, in particular its budgetary and human resources policies. The UN system is

bureaucratic and often lacks coherence (all the different agencies have different terms and conditions, funding arrangements etc.). But Mr Ban is seen by some member states as supporting so-called “Western values” of democracy and human rights, protection of civilians and women’s empowerment. One way to attack his policies is therefore to attack his reform agenda, including his appointments, his efforts to modernise the budgetary system, and to improve mobility of staff. We face daily battles on these issues in the 5<sup>th</sup> committee, with the opposition led by the ALBA group.

## **Conclusion**

It is vitally important that we win these arguments, if the UN is to become the effective organisation we want it to be across all three pillars of the charter: security, development and human rights. And it needs to be effective. The UN has never been so much in demand as it is in 2012. The security agenda is chock-a-block; Arab Spring, Iran, DPRK, Palestine, Sudan, coups in Africa in the Security Council; the NPT, Arms Trade Treaty outside. The development agenda includes Rio+20, climate change, enhancing humanitarian response, and preparations for the post 2015 MDG framework. The Human Rights agenda speaks for itself. It makes it a great time to be working for the UK at the UN.