Statement by Brian Katulis
Senior Fellow, Center for American Progress Action Fund, Washington, D.C.
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Homeland Security

"Unrest in the Middle East and North Africa:
Ramifications for U.S. Homeland Security"

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

More than three months into the Middle East uprisings, the United States faces dangerous threats on a daily basis from that region of the world. Fast-moving events in the Middle East risk pulling our country deeper into the tactical, reactive, and crisis management mode that has frequently characterized U.S. foreign policymaking in the Middle East for decades.

That is why it is important to take opportunities like today's hearing to step back from the daily events and assess the security implications of the recent changes in the Middle East.

At the start of this year, the Middle East entered a transition period that will likely take years to unfold. There may not be full clarity about the full implications of the changes underway until the latter part of this decade. The changes underway represent the fourth major strategic shock to the Middle East experienced at a regional level since 1979—the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, the 1991 Gulf War, and the 2001 start of the global war on terrorism. Each had their own ripple effects on the region. But the current uprisings and battles underway could do more to change the daily lives of people in the region for the better than those previous events.

A major regional transformation appears inevitable given the overwhelming economic, political, and social problems many countries in the region face. The United States has a choice: attempt to preserve an unsustainable status quo that started crumbling years ago, or use its considerable powers to shape outcomes in ways that make Americans safer while increasing security and prosperity for the people of the Middle East.

The risks in this transition are considerable—civil wars, prolonged insurgencies, and new regional wars could open the space for terrorist networks to operate more freely. In addition, all of the problems that existed before these uprisings—Iran's nuclear program and support for terrorism, the unresolved Arab-Israeli conflict, and Iraq's reintegration into the region—remain major challenges and more complicated in light of recent events in the region.

But the opportunities in this transition are also great—the greatest opportunity presented by the popular uprisings is to help key countries transition from the autocratic governments that permitted terrorist threats to fester alongside endemic poverty, weak governance, and corruption towards a more democratic system. The pathway ahead in the coming months and years is fraught with considerable risks that should not be downplayed, but standing by the autocratic regimes is no longer a viable option in many parts of the Middle East.

Leading terrorist threats at the start of the Middle East's transition

The top threat that the United States faces as a result of the uprisings and turmoil is the possibility that various terrorist networks could exploit the political unrest to sow wider chaos in the region or to plot new terror attacks against the United States or other U.S. allies. If regional intelligence and law enforcement agencies are distracted or weakened by internal political fights, this could present an operational opportunity for terrorist networks.

The United States needs to keep focused on four key fronts in the coming weeks:

1. Unrest in Yemen. Prior to the Middle East uprisings, the threat posed to the United States by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP, surpassed threats from Al Qaeda affiliates operating in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The ongoing political instability in Yemen over the past several months has diverted the Yemeni security establishment's attention and resources away from the efforts to deal with AQAP. Following the attempted bombing of a U.S. plane in Detroit in December 2009, the United States more than doubled its military assistance to Yemen in an effort to help government security agencies to deal with the increased threats.

At the time of this prepared written testimony, events in Yemen are very fluid, with a great deal of uncertainty about the likely outcome of a possible leadership transition in the Yemeni government. The central challenge facing U.S. policymakers is maintaining and building counterterrorism and security cooperation with officials in key Yemeni security agencies while assisting in quiet efforts to help Yemen develop a roadmap for political and economic reforms that respond to the people's concerns.

2. Libya's civil war. A protracted internal conflict in Libya presents two possible distinct threats to U.S. national security—the risk that the Qaddafi regime may remain in power and return to global terrorist attacks as it has in previous decades, and risks associated with supporting rebel groups that contain terrorist elements. In previous Middle East civil wars—Iraq last decade, Algeria in the 1990s, and Lebanon in the 1980s—terrorist networks contributed to prolonged instability that led to the deaths of more than 100,000 people in each of these conflicts. On balance, the violence associated with these terrorist groups in these past conflicts was focused on internal battles with these countries, but the instability presented an opportunity for terror networks to build their operational and ideological capacities.

3. Terrorist threats in states and territories bordering Israel. In the Gaza Strip and Lebanon during the past few weeks, there have been increased signals that terrorist groups such as the Palestinian Hamas, the Lebanese Hezbollah, and more radical Islamist groups may be preparing for another conflict with Israel. Iran appears to continue its effort to ship weapons and offer financial support to terrorist organizations operating along Israel's border.

In addition, recent prison breaks in Egypt and Libya during the unrest in both countries present an additional terrorism risk—estimates of the number of terrorist suspects who escaped during the unrest in both countries range from several hundred to several thousand. Sami Chehab, a member of the Lebanese Hezbollah who escaped from an Egyptian prison, is reportedly back in Lebanon—Chehab had been arrested on suspicions that he was helping supply weapons to

militants in the Gaza Strip. In February, Ayman Nofal, a senior Hamas commander, escaped from an Egyptian jail and made his way back to the Gaza Strip. These high-profile escapes may be just the tip of the iceberg of a larger number of terrorist suspects who are no longer in detention and may seek to upset a fragile security situation in the region.

4. Ongoing terrorist threats linked to the turmoil in Iraq. Although Iraq has faded from U.S. policy and political debates, the ongoing violence in Iraq as U.S. troops continue to withdraw from the country represents a fourth threat. Al Qaeda in Iraq, or AQI, claimed responsibility for last week's raid and hostage situation that killed nearly 60 people in the provincial council headquarters in Tikrit—and this was just the latest in a series of high-profile targeted attacks by AQI. In addition to the threats AQI poses to stability in Iraq, the continued threat posed by foreign terrorists who fought in Iraq and returned to their home countries remains a major challenge for countries such as Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Libya.

Developing integrated U.S. strategies to deal with terrorist threats at a time of change in the region

Executing political and economic reforms in this combustible regional security environment will be no easy task.

The current situation presents four main advantages that will make the tasks of dealing with these terrorist threats outlined above while marginalizing radical Islamist groups and advancing pragmatic political reforms manageable yet still difficult:

1. Al Qaeda's irrelevance in uprisings. For nearly the past 20 years, Al Qaeda, or AQ, has tried to build its ideological platform on two core pillars—tapping into popular discontent with the region's autocratic and corrupt governments and fomenting anti-American and anti-Western attitudes. The fact that AQ and its affiliates had virtually nothing to do with the removal of leaders in places like Egypt and Tunisia and the widespread calls for political reform has further weakened its credibility.

Looking ahead, it seems that AQ's popular appeal will remain low given that most of the protesters in key countries support democratic political reforms, something that AQ leadership opposes. The most radical Islamists view democracy as anathema to their agenda, yet the people of the region widely support democratic political reforms according to public opinion polls. If Al Qaeda continues to be opposed to democracy and uses violence to oppose democratic change, they will likely further marginalize themselves and be viewed as a threat to newly democratic states in the Middle East as much as they are in the United States.

2. Sharp divisions within radical and violent Islamist terrorist groups. The leading Islamist extremist groups lack a common strategy and remain sharply at odds with one another over matters of strategy, tactics, and operations. Although Al Qaeda central and its affiliates such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb have worked to enhance their coordination, the movements lack a common military and political agenda and are facing challenges from fringe Salafist groups.

3. Islamist political organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood could further marginalize extremist fringes. The third opportunity presented by the political openings in key countries of the Middle East is that democratic reforms could further lead to internal debates within more mainstream Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood that contribute to further marginalizing fringe Islamist groups. Although the Muslim Brotherhood and groups like Al Qaeda share a common intellectual and political lineage, the ties between the different strands of today's Islamists groups have frayed considerably and they disagree on core foundational principles. For example, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, AQ's second in command, wrote a book attacking the Muslim Brotherhood for its willingness to participate in democratic politics.

4. Strategic security and counterterrorism cooperation continues with key partners in the region and will likely continue in the coming years. Despite the additional threats presented by the distractions and diversion of resources away from counterterrorism efforts in certain places like Yemen and Egypt, the United States still maintains strong coordination and partnerships with key countries in the region and it continues to work with leaders in the security establishments of most Middle East countries. In particular, bilateral security and counterterrorism cooperation between the United States and Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, and most countries of the Gulf region remains strong. For decades, the United States has invested resources and efforts at enhancing coordination, and democratic political openings won't lead to quick and fast erosions of cooperation with most countries.

Even as key countries open up to political reforms in the coming years, it will likely remain in the strategic self-interest of the countries and people of the region to protect themselves from violent extremism and terrorism. Countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Yemen share a common interest with the United States and other global powers to make sure that radical nonstate actors don't further undermine stability in their countries and weaken an already fragile regional security environment.

Weighing these advantages against the risks, the United States should seek to adapt a new regional security approach that encourages pragmatic political and economic reforms while working to maintain security cooperation with existing institutions. In managing its interests in what is likely to be an extended period of transition, the United States will need to tailor its approaches to the unique circumstances of each country and our own security interests involved. Egypt and Tunisia have not been models for how we deal with Yemen or Bahrain, nor should they be. Each country has different internal dynamics and features, and our security interests vary from country to country. Here are two common principles and approaches that could be applied across the region and tailored to the circumstances of each country:

1. Work for political and economic reform within existing institutional frameworks. The leaders and people of the region are the ones who need to shape the reform agendas—and the United States should prepare to adapt the way it has done business in the region for decades. The transition in most Middle East countries will likely be gradual, and so will the changes in U.S. policy. The United States should leverage its existing relationships—particularly the military-to-military contacts and the strong ties it has with key countries in addressing common security challenges like terrorism—to support efforts to reform in systems so they can address the long list of problems.

For decades, the United States has made substantial investments in security sector reform and support in a range of Middle Eastern countries—Iraq is just one example. It also has had longstanding programs of security sector support throughout the region, working to build the capacity of military and intelligence agencies throughout the Middle East. The challenge now facing the United States is adapting this decades-long policy approach in the face of future democratic openings. Instead of attempts at wholesale replacement of institutions like we saw in Iraq in 2003 with the disbanding of the military, the United States should develop policies that work to connect security systems to executive, judicial, and legislative authorities that can provide oversight and accountability.

By adopting an integrated approach, the United States could help countries establish stronger foundations for better governance and anticorruption through governing. Security sector reform can promote better practices within governing systems—including fair and balanced oversight from democratic legislative branches and better working relationships with judicial authorities. This requires developing incentives to advance reform in implementing the rule of law. This will also require making investments in other types of U.S. power—diplomatic, development, and economic efforts—in order to have a more integrated approach that avoids the "stove piping"—U.S. agencies not coordinating efforts with other U.S. agencies. In essence, the United States will need to develop a more comprehensive and integrated approach that links efforts by our military and intelligence agencies with efforts by the State Department and USAID.

2. Prepare for the role of political Islam to increase in the Middle East. Second, the United States will need to learn to live and deal with political Islam, which is likely to see its influence grow as societies open up to reform. The recent U.S. experience in Iraq demonstrates that the United States can learn to work closely with a range of Islamist political groups to enhance stability and advance U.S. strategic interests. The leading political parties in the current Iraqi government are Islamist. During the civil war in Iraq, the U.S. military and intelligence agencies exploited cleavages among Islamist groups and used these divisions to reduce the threat of groups like AQI and make them marginal and tactical threats, as opposed to strategic threats.

Similarly, in other parts of the Middle East already experiencing reforms like Egypt or other countries likely to experience political change such as Jordan, Islamist parties and forces have become better organized and garnered stronger popular support. The United States should develop two bright red lines when it comes to offering support to a country in which Islamist political parties and forces play a role in the government. First, it should seek guarantees that Islamist movements would respect a broad range of universal democratic values as outlined in the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights. The notion that Islamism and democracy are fundamentally incompatible is outdated and needs to be tested as does the idea that Islamism represents an ideological challenge akin to that of communism during the Cold War. Seeking to isolate Islamist political parties before they have had a chance to prove themselves in political systems that are opening would be counterproductive.

Second, the U.S. government should maintain its policy of not working with Islamist groups currently on its foreign terrorist organization list. It must continue to make a distinction between those groups that have explicitly renounced violence and groups that have not. For those that

have not renounced violence, it should press regional allies and other interlocutors to encourage those movements that espouse violence as a means for bringing about political change to update their views to reflect universal principles of respecting human rights and supporting nonviolent means.

Conclusion

The popular uprisings of the Middle East have brought the region across a new threshold, and the changes underway will likely take years to unfold. The unrest has presented the United States with some new and pressing terrorist threats but the old way of doing business in the Middle East is no longer sustainable. America's security need not come at the cost of supporting dictatorships and authoritarian governments that are corrupt and do not respect the rights of their people. The United States can enhance counterterrorism cooperation in the long run if it works with a wider range of institutions and accepts the reality that Islamist political groups could be among the most important allies in marginalizing and defeating Islamist extremists and terrorist groups.