

DRAFT LECTURE BY DEPUTY MINISTER OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND COOPERATION, EBRAHIM I EBRAHIM, ON THE OCCASION OF THE SPEAKERS MEETING AT THE SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS (SAIIA), 22 JULY 2011

Chairperson and Member of the SAIIA National Council, Mr Kuseni Dlamini;

National Director of SAIIA, Dr Elizabeth Sidiropoulos;

Senior Government Officials;

Ambassadors and High Commissioners;

Members of Diplomatic Corps;

Distinguished guests;

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am particularly grateful to the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) for bringing us together this evening to reflect on the on-going developments in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regions.

I hope it will be clear at the end that in as far as the MENA region is concerned, we are dealing with an evolving situation that if well-managed could lead to democracy, openness, stability and development – whilst if badly-managed could spell trouble to a region that has known autocratic rule and successive monarchs. The dramatic changes sweeping through the MENA region will have a more enduring impact on global security. The big question is of course what will endure in the Arab world?

Chairperson, ladies and gentlemen;

Lenin once said: *“There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks when decades happen”*.

We are reflecting about events which were quite unexpected and developments that are still unfolding; indeed we are witnessing “*weeks when decades happen*”. I therefore doubt that anyone can claim to have made concrete conclusions about the wider implications of this situation. At the very least we have all observed, and we are still trying to fully understand the “decades” that are “happening”. I will as well just offer some observations about what has come to be known as the “Arab Spring”, and make some reflections, inconclusive as they might be, on the wider implications of these developments.

Chairperson,

What has come to be known as the “Arab Spring”, really began as a genuine people’s yearning for basic human freedoms. It emerged as genuine, albeit spontaneous, attempts by ordinary people to have greater political participation in their countries, as well as economic opportunities to sustain their livelihoods. Indeed this was certainly the case in Tunisia and Egypt. These are people who are blaming their so-called “stable regimes” for their poverty, unemployment and poor living conditions – to which they attach corruption, cronyism and oppression.

The seeds for such transformatory ferment have been long in the making, due in the main, to the nature and character of the state in most countries of the Middle East and North Africa. It is our observation that the Arab upheaval - challenges not only the regimes that are falling - but most fundamentally the entire Arab order that has held since the decolonisation of three generations ago. Most Arab states, historically, developed a dynasty-driven regime successor paradigm, which has become one of the key rallying issues for the uprising.

As the actions of ordinary peoples in Tunisia and Egypt garnered momentum, and moved to other countries of the region, we observed some other factors emerging. For instance, those who took to the streets seemed to move beyond peaceful protests, and

calls for the broadening of economic and political space but into what appear to be a call for a total change of regime. Indeed in most countries that have been affected things have started to look more like what Gourgouris observed, that ... *“revolution now means what it has always meant in essence: the people’s removal of their consent to power”*.

It is also our observation that in looking at the developments in the Middle East and North Africa, we cannot ignore the impact that the overall prevailing global, economic and financial crisis would have had on these countries. Perhaps the direct impact of these crises was immediately felt in most countries of the region, thus, unleashing the feelings of anger and frustration by thousands who have suffered silently for decades across the region. So we do think that some form of new governance models will emerge from the wreckage of these regimes, with amongst others strongman states diminishing and cronyism plus clan-based governance being replaced by more representative leadership.

With regards to the immediate impact of the “Arab Spring”, it would not be far-fetched to observe that none of the countries in the Middle East and North Africa are actually immune from the changes currently taking place. That is why, I think, we have observed some bold moves on the part of some to immediately try or rather appear to be addressing concerns of their citizens in order to appease them.

In other instances, bold moves seem to have been made to try and preserve the status quo. It would for instance be interesting for us to hear what academics and analysis make of the move by the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) to invite the Kingdom of Morocco as well as Jordan into its fold. Two countries that are geographically not part of the Gulf, and economically not similar to the GCC Member States. The only common factor being that they are all led by dynasties. The question though is whether these moves would succeed in quenching ordinary people’s thirst for change.

We can also not rule out the possibility that the changes we are seeing in the Middle East and North Africa will have a direct impact on the situation in and Question of Palestine. This arises especially in the context of a possibility that the emerging leaderships in some of the countries, particularly in Egypt, could decide on a more hardened approach towards Israel and strengthen calls for a genuine process of the creation of a Palestinian state.

We also cannot rule out the possibility of negative and severe impacts on Sahel region of Africa, as a result of the “Arab Spring”, especially the situation in Libya. Among other things, there are already reported cases of the proliferation of arms within a region that has historically been fragile.

It is also our observation that most of the structural deficiencies that resulted in the start of the “Arab Spring” would not be resolved in the short-term-to-medium term. These deficiencies may further be compounded by evolving humanitarian crises and the fall-out of the uprisings e.g. illegal immigration, growing sectarian divides, civil and regional conflicts. Accordingly, the international community has to ready itself to have a continued engagement in this region for some time to come.

Ladies and gentlemen;

We have followed the political developments in the Middle East and North Africa with interest because there is an inextricable link between our developmental aspirations, and genuine stability in these two regions. To us, these regions remain extremely pivotal to the realisation of our trade policies and strategies.

Our export basket to the region comprises higher value added products, which in turn supports our industrial development and employment objectives. Our analyses confirm that in five years, Africa’s output will expand 50% - confirming that our continent is the next pole of global economic growth.

These regions remain critical to South Africa in terms of our historical connections; our commitment to advance international peace and security; for being a major source of our oil supply; and of course offering significant opportunities for tourism and Foreign Direct Investment attraction, in particular sovereign wealth funds. On top of what we have been doing, we nevertheless need to continue conducting an analysis of our trade and investment engagements in the Middle East and North Africa, and finally develop a more focussed and strategic economic approach under the circumstances.

Now we know that the uprising in these countries have been triggered by issues such as economic discontent among the youth, democratic deficit, questionable political leadership, civil society dissatisfaction, lack of political freedom and suppression of political activity. Indeed the tumultuous developments in the MENA region confirm our assertion that there can never be development in the absence of peace, and peace in the absence of development.

What we should therefore be readying ourselves for is to offer our assistance to this region as it struggles to build political consensus and develop strategies that would bring the different factions together. Despite the challenges faced by these countries, we still maintain cordial bilateral relations with most of them, as aptly demonstrated by significant levels of bilateral trade between South Africa and respective countries of these regions.

What we also know is that some countries in these two regions do have the capacity to emerge peaceful and stable, whilst others will need to mitigate or adapt to the impact of these latest trends. For South Africa, our point of departure is that we need to understand the dynamics at play, which remain critical as we re-evaluate our objectives. Be that as it may, we will not lose sight of the need to consolidate our economic and political relations, including designing specific investment promotion activities that will ensure our continued presence in the region.

Chairperson,

Allow me to use the opportunity of this forum to once more reiterate that South Africa voted in favour of UNSC resolutions 1970 and 1973, as we believed that the adoption of measures, including a ceasefire and no-fly zone as authorised by these resolutions, constituted an important element for the protection of civilians and the safety for the delivery of humanitarian assistance to those most vulnerable and those desperately in need of such assistance.

The popular uprisings in Libya informed by the “Arab Spring” and the subsequent resolutions, including the NATO bombings, have proven to be more complex by the day. Our President and our Minister have made several pronouncements on our engagements vis-à-vis our country’s position on Libya, be it for resolutions 1970 and 1973 or our support for the African Union (AU) Roadmap.

There is no need to attempt sequencing developments since February 2011, critical though is that we have the opposition to Colonel Gaddafi’s regime stationed in Benghazi, having gained access to weapons and pushing back Colonel Gaddafi’s forces. The result is a civil war that is underway, which has pitted Libyans against Libyans – with decisions on the fate of this country being taken somewhere in Paris, London and Washington.

We supported the adoption of these resolutions to the extent that it preserves the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Libya, and also explicitly rejected any foreign occupation or unilateral military intervention under the pretext of protection of civilians.

Subsequent to our support for these two resolutions, we as a country have been concerned by continued attacks on Tripoli from NATO airstrikes on a daily basis. This has and continues to be done under the pretext of resolution 1973, which ironically is meant to protect civilians. Colonel Gaddafi’s regime has continuously called for a ceasefire; however NATO and its alliance partners have continuously rejected these

appeals. To complicate matters, the landscape of the conflict has changed due to NATO's mandate no longer being about the protection of civilians but "regime change".

Ladies and Gentlemen;

You will be aware that the AU High Level Committee has played a crucial role in the mediation efforts on the Libyan crisis, culminating in an AU Communiqué on the Roadmap to peace for Libya that was agreed to here in South Africa last month. These efforts are all aimed at bringing a political solution to a political problem – not a military solution to a political problem, which seems to be NATO's brief.

We are mindful of the fact that the Libyan issue has become internationalised, and it is our conviction that the AU must give leadership on this matter. We are equally aware of the International Criminal Court's three warrants of arrest for Colonel Gaddafi, his son Seif, and his head of military intelligence, Abdullah Al-Senussi for crimes against humanity. We share the view that is held by the AU High Level Committee that the issuing of the warrants plainly seeks to undermine the work done by the AU committee.

Chairperson, ladies and gentlemen;

In pursuance to finding lasting peace on the continent, and within the context of our foreign policy objectives, we shall continue working with the AU to re-assert our commitment to conflict resolution, especially in the Middle East and North Africa. Our intention is to engage other countries within the region and encourage them to adopt a multilateral approach to conflict resolution so as to moderate the role of hegemonic Western powers that engage the region to serve their own vested interests.

In this day and age, it is disheartening to experience the manifestation of military means of changing governments – an act which NATO intends carrying out on Libya. I believe that we can bring lasting peace and stability by intensifying continental conflict prevention mechanisms through the AU. At times there are early warning systems

which alert us of a potential conflict in the continent – we have in some instances not responded appropriately. This is a serious weakness in the overall African Peace and Security Architecture.

The manner in which the Western powers have misinterpreted and misused UNSC processes and decisions has seriously undermined the credibility of the multilateral system. This has actually affected the attempt by Western powers to pass through a resolution on Syria. Many countries, including South Africa, feel betrayed by Western powers on resolution 1973, and would be very much reluctant to support any resolution sponsored by the United Kingdom, United States of America, and France on Syria.

However, our collective stance on Syria does not translate into condoning what is currently occurring in that country. As such, as a country we make a call for all sides to act with restraint, and respect relevant human rights protection instruments. We strongly feel that any attempts to resolve the situation in Syria requires an inclusive dialogue process, which should be led by the peoples of Syria.

Such a process should aim to address the fundamental and legitimate aspirations of the Syrians, thus enabling them to exercise, fully, their basic freedoms. In fact, we do believe that the reform proposals from the Government of Syria, which include a dialogue among Syrians, should be encouraged, supported, and be given a chance to be explored by the peoples of Syria, without the interference of Western powers, taking cover under multilateral institutions in order to push their own, narrow and self-interested agendas.

Chairperson,

We are encouraged by Egypt's announcement that it will hold Parliamentary elections in September 2011 followed by Presidential elections in November 2011. South Africa will support the Egyptian people and the government as they continue to lead the country towards fully-fledged democracy.

As far as the events in Tunisia are concerned, we welcome measures taken by Tunisia to promote democracy and express our satisfaction with the ongoing preparations for the election of a Constitution Assembly scheduled for 24 July 2011 as part of the roadmap announced recently by the interim regime.

We note that the roadmap also empowers the Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution and also elect from among its members a temporary president who is to hold power until the writing of a new constitution and the completion of preparations for presidential or legislative elections. We will continue to support the transitional process in Tunisia and urge all parties to work together to ensure that the transitional process is peaceful.

On the Middle East Peace Process, we will continue to support efforts to bring about peace by especially playing our part towards the Palestinian peoples yearning for Statehood. We stand behind the reconciliation efforts between Fatah and Hamas and welcome the united front from these Palestinian organisations, as this would strengthen the position of all Palestinians in negotiations with Israel. We are aware that such a path to reconciliation is fraught with dangers, but our hope remains that it must succeed!

On Libya, we remain fully supportive of the AU Communiqué, which simply calls for negotiations between the warring groups in Libya to start negotiating; it calls on Colonel Gaddafi to excuse himself and give Libyans a chance to negotiate amongst themselves; it calls on the cessation of hostilities; it calls for a humanitarian pause to afford humanitarian efforts to reach those that need them most; calls for the release of political prisoners; and calls on all Libyans to create an environment conducive to discuss a comprehensive ceasefire.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our overriding mantra when it comes to dealing with vexing international questions remains the same, and that is, political dialogue. When we insist on this, some of our detractors are quick to point out that we maintain this approach because we are keen to “export” the South African experience of negotiating our post-1994 break-through. Nothing is further from the truth! We said as far back as 1955 when we adopted the Freedom Charter that *“South Africa shall strive to maintain world peace and the settlement of all international disputes by negotiation-not war”*.

Some of the sceptics would continue to refuse to accept the appropriateness of this stance, but I believe, history has, and will continue to confirm that we are correct! Indeed it is cause for some reflection, why all of a sudden, there is talk of negotiations with the Taliban, whereas all along they were declared terrorists!

As South Africans, we remain encouraged with the fact that most countries that are involved in conflict resolution are gradually embracing one of our important foreign policy principles which speaks to “peaceful resolution of conflicts through the medium of negotiations as opposed to embracing a military approach”.

Our argument is that a military approach to resolving conflicts, which entails boots on the ground, dividing nations by supporting one group against the other, bombing national infrastructures and destroying civilian lives – does not provide guarantees to a genuine and self-sustaining peace. We will continue to argue that genuine peace among warring factions can only be achieved through the medium of negotiations and dialogue.

I thank you all!