The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Political Pluralism in the OSCE Mediterranean Partners?

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Mr. Chairman,

This is not a good time for pluralism and human rights in the Middle East and North Africa, although there are important degrees and variations. In my short comments today, I will limit myself to describing some broad dynamics affecting pluralism, human rights, and democracy in the region so that we can have a context for a constructive discussion of the trends and possibilities. My focus will be on the challenges faced and not on the possibilities or the bright spots.

Let me start with the impact of the Arab uprisings and five issues that need to be understood.

The most profound, and probably enduring, change that has occurred in the region with the advent of the Arab uprisings is the empowerment of the individual in a region where the individual has counted less politically and culturally. This empowerment is driven principally by an expanding information revolution, especially satellite TV, the Internet, and social media, that is not going away. Governments have lost control of information, people's expectations are rising because of what they see outside their own countries, and the interactive nature of the Internet and social media is empowering. This public empowerment is in the long term an important and constructive force that is likely to push for more freedom, pluralism, and human rights. But in the short term, there are dynamics that lead to exactly the opposite, as we have witnessed in a number of states swept by public uprisings. It should be noted, however, that even countries that have felt only a limited impact of the uprisings, such as Jordan, Morocco, and Algeria, are not immune to the public pressure that comes with the empowerment generated by an expanding information revolution.

First, the fact that the public is empowered doesn't mean it is unified. In fact Arab societies—and Israel's—are highly diverse, and that diversity had been muted by authoritarianism, in the case of the Arab states, and intense external conflict in the case of the Israelis. This diversity is not limited to the kind of sectarianism that we see in states like Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain. There are ideological, economic, and geographic divisions that surface. As we have seen in Egypt, aside from the roughly 10% of the population who are Christians, the Muslim majority is

overwhelmingly Sunni. The divide between secularists and Islamists, among others, has pitted people against each other in a zero-sum confrontation that is at least as divisive as sectarianism. Public empowerment means that every group wants its voices heard and wants a share of the power in a changing political empowerment. This is especially so as central authority weakens, and new rules of the game are being set up.

Second, in the struggle for a new system, and everyone vying for influence and a share of the pie, not everyone is equal. In these environments, minorities are most vulnerable as the state weakens, and we see this already in a number of states, where groups like Christian Arabs have become particularly vulnerable. In addition, the public is still fighting against existing sources of power that want to assert themselves in a new polity. This includes state bureaucracies, corporations, individuals and groups with deep pockets, and, above all, military institutions. In fact, in all the states with significant uprisings, the initial outcome, and the resulting conditions, could not be understood without understanding the roles of the military institutions: In Egypt and Tunisia, the initial toppling of rulers came with the support, or at least the acquiescence, of the military, and the different results so far are partly a function of the decisions each institution has taken. The outcome will continue to depend on the decisions of each institution. In Syria, Bahrain, and Libya, the army supported the rulers and the outcome was ultimately dependent on that decision.

Third, transitions are destabilizing, and that usually is not a good thing for democracy, pluralism, and human rights. Deep insecurity and economic deprivation, often short-term results of a weakened central authority, provide fertile ground for those who want to rule with an iron fist—as fear trumps pluralism and human rights. We see this in many of the states facing the uprisings to varying degrees, and we see this also playing into the hands of those governments that have not had to deal with their own major uprisings. In fact, one reason why the Arab uprisings have not expanded beyond the early cases is that the anarchy, such as in Syria and Libya, and economic deprivation and limited insecurity, as in Egypt, have given rulers a way of frightening their own public: Do you want to be in Aleppo and Tripoli, or Amman and Riyadh?

Fourth, while each country in the region has its own specific conditions that have to be evaluated separately, it is fair to say that there are commonalities in the Arab world. Regional politics are interwoven with domestic politics; the international is sometimes hard to separate from the national. Polls indicate common aspirations and, more centrally, note the early spillover from Tunisia across the Arab world, but not into other regions, including non-Arab Muslim countries. In addition, it is also obvious that the way the uprisings have unfolded in every country—with the possible exception of Tunisia—cannot be explained without reference to major external intervention. Syria is of course experiencing upheavals that are at the core internal, but the intensity, nature, and ultimately outcome of the struggle cannot be understood without the role of Iran and Saudi Arabia, Syria's neighboring states, not

to mention the United States and Russia. Even in Egypt, where there is no military intervention from the outside, the infusion of billions of dollars from the Arab Gulf states is an important factor in what happens in Egypt as President Sisi tries to stabilize the economy.

Fifth, the case of the non-Arab Middle Eastern state in the group, Israel, is of course unique, but there are potential troubles ahead for pluralism and democracy, whose prospects remain partly tied to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israel is a successful democracy within the pre-1967 war boundaries. But two things suggest troubling trends: the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza have not had full independence, and the international toleration of this situation has been predicated on the assumption that occupation is temporary and that the focus should be on achieving a political settlement that leads to two states. If the hope for two states is lost, and a sense emerges that the status quo is semi-permanent, the Israeli-Palestinian inequality will be evaluated differently. Second, as the Israeli aspiration for a Jewish majority state becomes threatened within existing boundaries, we will see more ultra-Jewish nationalism reflected not only in the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, but also in the internal dynamics between Israel's Jewish majority and the 20% of its population who are Arab citizens—as we have begun to see already. In turn, the absence of independence for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza will generate empathy among Israel's Arab citizens in a manner that plays into the hand of extremists on both sides—thus jeopardizing the coexistence of Jews and Arabs even within Israel's pre-1967 borders.