



NATO AND THE ARAB SPRING

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WELCOME:

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MODERATOR:

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Columnist

International Herald Tribune

SPEAKER:

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Secretary General

NATO

Transcript by Way With Words

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JAN TECHAU: We're extremely thankful that you have found time in between two wars and a major reform effort in your own organisation to come to us today and to define for us the role you envision for NATO in the transformation process that has just started in the Middle East.

Let me thank the Académie Diplomatique Internationale for the great cooperation, for making this possible, for working with us here in Brussels for the first time, and I hope that we can continue doing this.

Last year I wrote an article about NATO, a short one, and it started with the sentence, Anders Fogh Rasmussen has won the war in Afghanistan; and the editors of the journal that I submitted this to were not very happy about that first sentence. I had to explain to them that, of course, not literally he went down there and won the war with his own hands, but he did something that was quite as useful as that; he took the Afghanistan issue that was a losing story, a nightmare for NATO, and turned it into a rejuvenating story for NATO.

He used Afghanistan to start a major reform process, to shake up NATO headquarters, to write a new strategic concept, and to put expectations on a more realistic footing, and so I wrote this sentence; he won the war in Afghanistan in his own specific way.

Today the Arab Spring offers us another chance to turn a losing game into a winning game and to get some things right that previously we hadn't gotten right. I very much hope that we will get some very interesting ideas. We're very curious as to how you envision the Alliance's role in the Middle East and how we can turn a region that is known for its bad news into a region that produces good news. Thanks for being with us, and thanks for your patience with us, and bear with our questions. Thanks a lot.

JEAN-CLAUDE COUSSERAN: Thank you, Jan, for your remarks. It's a personal honour and a pleasure to welcome the Secretary General of NATO to this special session of the Forum for New Diplomacy here in Brussels.

The Forum for New Diplomacy is a joint initiative of the Académie Diplomatique Internationale and the International Herald Tribune, two institutions based in Paris but with global mandates. The Académie was founded in the 20s as a think-tank devoted to the international affairs and today is being revitalised under the presidency of His Highness the Aga Khan.

We are very pleased to be convening this session of the Forum here in Brussels, thanks to the excellent cooperation with Carnegie Europe. We sincerely appreciate this opportunity to be working with them, and hope there will be other occasions for future work together.

The topic we are discussing today, NATO and the Arab Spring, could not be more timely. What [?] we have seen in the Arab world in the recent months has compelled us to reconsider much of what we long thought about the region. It is not an exaggeration to say that these changes are very consequential and they will be permanent.

There are many challenges but, clearly, many opportunities, too. Europe has now the chance to re-evaluate and redefine its relationship with the southern part of the Mediterranean. It is important to establish now a new relationship with the countries, the society and the people of this region.

It is therefore a special privilege, Mr Secretary General, to be able to hear your own thoughts and reflections on the current situation and the future potential developments with NATO in this area. Mr

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Secretary General, we thank you for being with us today. Before beginning, I would like Roger Cohen to make some remarks on behalf of the International Herald Tribune.

ROGER COHEN: Mr Secretary General, ladies and gentlemen, the IHT is delighted to welcome Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the NATO Secretary General, a man who deals daily with the stirring changes and stark challenges that stand at the centre of our coverage of the world.

The IHT in all its manifestations and activities, from paper to iPad, from conferences to Kindle, is committed to broad debate of major global issues in the belief that such debate is the basis of any healthy society. Throughout the world, and especially in the Arab world today, we see people questing for their slice of modernity, and interpreting modernity is precisely this: open exchange and the rule of law beyond the suffocating clamp of despotism.

NATO has, increasingly, an alliance of values committed to the spread of those values. The Secretary General has been a point-man in the Alliance's transformation and modernisation. He even Tweets and has more than 45,000 followers. With NATO now engaged at the frontline of struggles for more decent and representative societies, his responsibility is great, his word of great moment, not least with respect to the Arab Spring, our subject today.

In preparing this event, we are proud to have been associated with the Académie Diplomatique Internationale and Carnegie Europe, organisations committed to deepening understanding of the world in a spirit of rigorous inquiry, informed curiosity and constant fairness. It is in that spirit that we welcome the Secretary General today here in Brussels.

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: Ambassador Cousseran, Mr Techau, Mr Cohen, ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for inviting me to speak at the inauguration of the Forum for New Diplomacy here in Brussels. I think it's a very timely initiative, and I would like to thank the three hosts, the Académie Diplomatique Internationale, the International Herald Tribune, and Carnegie Europe.

These last few months have been among the most eventful that I can remember. We have seen a new wave of freedom spreading across the Middle East and North Africa. From Tunis to Cairo to Benghazi, people broke down the wall of fear just as another brave generation broke down the Berlin Wall. They chose change through peaceful demonstration not violent extremism, they chose the idea of freedom not the ideology of fear, and they showed the world that the future lies in the hands of the people.

Across the region there are vast differences and unique challenges, and in each country the authorities have responded differently. Some took steps to meet the demands of their citizens, others realised their time was up and moved aside, yet others answered the call for freedom and dignity with state violence. Today I would like to look at three questions: what has changed in the region, why does it matter for NATO, and how can we work together with the countries of the region to shape the future?

First, what has changed? A younger generation is demanding a brighter tomorrow; for too many years they heard about economic growth but did not feel the benefits. They saw wealth but were unable to share it. Some even saw elections but did not experience democracy. Now they want to have all those for real.

We should not underestimate the importance of this moment for all of us. This is the beginning of a long, complex and possibly turbulent transformation, but it will shape the region and the world for years to come and, I believe, for the better. We should embrace it and see it as a chance to make a fresh start.

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For too long many thought that you could not have both stability and democracy in that region. The men and women on the Arab streets have shown they want both. They sent their government and the world a very clear message: stability at the expense of our aspirations is not true stability. This is because freedom is not just a Western value, it is a universal value. It's not a commodity for the few, it should be shared by the many, and it is not to be feared. It is the best guarantee of long-term peace.

Tragically, some governments have answered the call for change with repression not reforms. In Libya Gaddafi's regime brutally and systematically attacked its own people. The region and the world did not stand idly by; in an historic decision, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1973, authorising all necessary measures to protect civilians. It is under this explicit mandate that NATO took overall command of military operations in Libya, with strong support from the region and the participation of partners from the Arctic to the Arabian Sea.

Obviously, this development is of immense importance and it matters a great deal to NATO. Our essential mission is to ensure that the Alliance remains an unparalleled community of freedom, peace, security, and shared values. Allies have built a solid security home in which we are prosperous and at peace, but how safe can we really be when a crisis breaks out on our doorstep?

Throughout history the fate of Europe, North Africa and the wider Middle East have been linked; our economies are linked, our people are linked, and our security is linked, too. We face the same threats: terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, potential disruption of our energy supplies, and illegal trafficking. These threats are the same wherever we live, in the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, or North America, and we must work together to deal with them.

It's the same with the crisis in Libya; if NATO and our partners in the region had not acted, we would have seen more bloodshed, from Benghazi to Brega, and the end of the freedom movement in Libya. Across the region the bright Arab Spring could have turned into bleak winter.

We want to see the Arab Spring blossom and a region that is free, democratic, modern and stable. All of us have so much to gain from a closer relationship, politically, economically, and culturally. We all know it won't happen overnight, but it can happen, and NATO wants to help make it happen.

That brings me to my third question: how can NATO work with the countries of the region to shape the future? First, we will continue our efforts to fulfil the United Nations' mandate to protect the Libyan people. In just two months, since we started our mission, we have made significant progress. We have the momentum and we are fulfilling our mandate. We have considerably degraded Gaddafi's ability to use force against civilians and lay siege to cities. We have saved countless lives.

I was struck to read about Amran Zoufrey, an 84-year old man from Misrata; he wept as he walked through the town centre past buildings blasted by Gaddafi's forces. He said, if God hadn't brought NATO, they would have burned us all.

Clearly, the only permanent solution will be political not military, but to pave the way allies and partners need to keep up the pressure, and we will for as long as necessary. Actually, just today NATO and partners have decided to extend our mission for Libya for another 90 days. The question is not: if Gaddafi will go, but when. The contact group and the recent G8 summit made that absolutely clear, and NATO allies and partners strongly endorse that call. It could take some time yet, but it could also happen tomorrow.

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Let me be clear: I do not see a major role for NATO in Libya after we have completed our UN-mandated operation, but once Gaddafi has gone, the international community must help the Libyan people ensure a peaceful and orderly transition to democracy, and it must start to plan and prepare for that day.

Now, secondly, the reform of the military and the security sector are key milestones on the road to democracy. Modern, effective and accountable defence and security institutions will be a vital priority for many of the countries in the region, and NATO is well suited to help achieve this. Actually, many allies went through demanding defence reforms after their own revolutions just over 20 years ago, and we stand ready to share this collective experience and expertise also for the benefit of Libya. A new Libya needs modern, democratic security forces that will not attack the people but protect them.

I could imagine providing assistance in building Libya's new Ministry of Defence, a joint General Staff, and a national security agency, institutions that would be accountable to a democratically elected government, in a country where all institutions have been systematically wiped out over the last 40 years. Of course, any assistance from NATO would be tailor-made; it would complement other support, particularly from the European Union and the United Nations. It would be developed at the request of each country and in close cooperation with them.

Finally, we are ready to engage in an enhanced dialogue on security matters. We have a successful track record of political engagement with countries in North Africa and the broader Middle East. We have already two partnerships that bring together the 28 allies with many countries of the region. We have our Mediterranean dialogue with Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia, and we have our Istanbul Cooperation Initiative with Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. I think the Arab Spring has underlined the need to elevate our dialogue and partnerships to a new level, and our new strategic concept calls for such enhanced cooperation.

20 years ago a new future emerged in Central and Eastern Europe, after the end of the Cold War. At that time, NATO established the North Atlantic Cooperation Council to provide the countries of that region with vital political and practical support. Now a new future is emerging in North Africa and the Middle East.

We are prepared to engage with partners across and beyond our existing partnership frameworks. This will allow us to discuss a broader range of issues, including those that our partners wish to raise, and it will allow us to involve all others who have an interest in bringing security and stability to the region. I see a democratic Libya as a most welcome partner for NATO, regardless of whether they would want to seek engagement within or outside our Mediterranean dialogue.

Ladies and gentlemen, NATO member states form a unique community of values committed to individual liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. We consider these to be universal principles that apply to all peoples of the world, including in North Africa and the Middle East. That's why NATO allies support the legitimate aspirations of people throughout this region. The Arab Spring has inspired us all; it has shown the tremendous potential waiting to be unlocked in the region, and NATO is ready, willing and able to help to unlock it.

We can help countries in the region build the future they want, but stability, security and prosperity cannot be imposed from outside; they can only come from within. They can only come by meeting the legitimate aspirations of people throughout the region. They can only come once all the people in the region have the opportunity to enjoy the universal values we all cherish: freedom, democracy and human rights. Thank you very much.

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ROGER COHEN: Thank you, Mr Secretary General. You seem to say there that NATO will not stop until Gaddafi is gone. What is NATO's mission, in fact: to protect civilians, as per Resolution 1973, or to make sure the Libyan people are finally free after 40 years of tyranny, as per President Barack Obama? Is it protecting civilians or making sure that the Libyan people are free and Gaddafi is gone?

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: It is to protect the civilian population according to the UN mandate, but, actually, I do believe that it's hard to imagine a complete end to attacks against civilians as long as Gaddafi remains in power. The removal of Gaddafi and the protection of civilians - these two elements are interlinked.

ROGER COHEN: They're linked, absolutely, to each other; you can't imagine the mission ending so long as he's still there.

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: They're interlinked but in two separate tracks. I would like to stress that NATO as such is pursuing the military track, and we have defined three clear military objectives for our mission: firstly, a complete end to all attacks against civilians; secondly, a withdrawal of Gaddafi forces to their bases and barracks; and, thirdly, immediate and unhindered humanitarian access to people in need. These are our military objectives.

Then, in a parallel political track, the international community must put a maximum of pressure on the regime and support the opposition with the aim to open for a peaceful transition to democracy.

ROGER COHEN: The South African Foreign Minister, for example, said yesterday, we did not vote at the UN for a regime change in Libya. What do you say to that kind of objection?

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: That the UN Resolution 1973 is very clear; we are mandated to protect civilians against attacks, and I would like to stress that we are not targeting individuals; we are targeting critical military capabilities that can be used to attack civilians.

ROGER COHEN: You said NATO has extended for 90 days now, but both the mission in Afghanistan and, for the United States, the war in Iraq have shown the great difficulty often of getting out once you've gone in. Are you worried that there will be no easy exit from Libya and that 90 days won't be enough?

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: I hope to see a solution to the conflict in Libya before the expiration of the 90-day mandate, but by taking that decision today, we have also sent a very clear message to the Gaddafi regime that we are strongly determined to stay as long as it takes to fulfill our mission, and that is to protect the civilian population against all kinds of attack.

I'm not going to guess about timelines, but I can assure you that once we have completed our mission, we would happily declare: mission accomplished.

ROGER COHEN: Do you have any specific indication that Gaddafi is preparing to leave? The Zuma mission yesterday almost... or suggested the contrary, that he is digging into his bunker and he ain't going anywhere?

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: What we do see is that Gaddafi and his regime are more and more isolated every day. Militarily we have made significant progress; we have considerably degraded his war machine; he's not any longer capable to launch major attacks against his own people. Internationally he and his regime are completely isolated. ICC is waiting. We see defections from his inner circle.

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It's my clear assessment that this combination of a strong military pressure and a reinforced international political pressure will eventually lead to the collapse of the regime. As I said in my speech...

ROGER COHEN: In what timeframe? How long do you think he can last?

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: That's exactly the question where I'm not going to embark on guessing. What I will do is to convey the very clear message that we will stay committed as long as it takes to finish our mission.

ROGER COHEN: Gaddafi is probably betting the opposite; that if he can just hang on long enough, the Alliance will begin to fray. Already we see Norway saying that this is a terrible strain on resources, and it's not a very popular war with the civilian population in Europe. His bet is the opposite: NATO will fray before he goes. What do you say to that?

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: No doubt that's his calculation, but in that respect I think it is a major blow to these expectations that the Alliance, plus our partners, took the decision today to extend the mission for another 90 days from the 27th June. He can't wait us out. Based on experience, we also know that allies and partners are prepared to stay committed and step up to the plate.

Some weeks ago I called for increased contributions, and allies and partners increased their contributions and also allowed more flexible use of their assets. Today's decision is a very, very clear message to Gaddafi and his regime.

ROGER COHEN: Do you think this mission, where Europe has taken the lead at this point, has demonstrated a need for Europe to get more serious about defence budgets, has shown that the European dependence on the United States remains too great, and that if indeed Europe is going to assume responsibilities in this way, it has to think again about defence?

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: Indeed, yes. That's the short answer. Let me elaborate a bit on that; I think the good news is that the Libya mission has demonstrated, I would say, the principle of solidarity in practice within our alliance.

We have been used to think that all operations should have American lead, but the Americans have deliberately handed over that responsibility to other allies, to Canada and European allies and partners in the region, and, actually, Canada, European allies and partners have demonstrated that they are capable to take lead responsibility for such an operation. I think that's really a demonstration of strength of NATO.

At the same time, it puts a lot of focus on exactly the point you mentioned, that European allies, in particular, should focus on the level of defence investments, because if the current trend continues for many years to come, declining defence budgets, then down the road Europe will not be able to take on such responsibility. You will see a decline of European influence in the world, you will see a Europe that is not capable to participate actively in international crisis management operations, and that's not in Europe's interest.

This mission sends a very clear message to all European governments: take care, do not carry through disproportionate cuts in defence budgets.

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ROGER COHEN: Some people say, why Libya and not Syria? Why Libya not Bahrain? What do you say to that? How do you measure the Western strategic interest in democratic change, which you so eloquently described in your speech, versus the Western need for stability in, say, a country like Saudi Arabia? How do you balance change versus stability?

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: I think I was quite clear in my speech by stating that there is no contradiction between freedom and democracy, on the one hand, and stability, on the other hand.

You may be able to create some stability in the very short-term through repression – yes, well, maybe – but I think what we have seen in North Africa and the Middle East is that it's not a sustainable situation in the longer-term perspective; on the contrary...

ROGER COHEN: Well, it went on for 30 or 40 years previously...

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: Yes, well, but in world history that's not a long time. I think the only way to ensure long-term peace and stability is to allow people's will to be reflected in the governments of their countries; so that's freedom, that's democracy. Having said that, I also strongly condemn the way the Syrian security forces brutally attack the Syrian people.

Of course, you ask a very relevant question: why Libya and not Syria? Very often I meet that question, and I have only a very pragmatic answer to offer: the difference is that in Libya we operate on the basis of a UN mandate and with strong support from the region, neither of these conditions are fulfilled as regards Syria.

ROGER COHEN: Do you feel badly today that for so long we in the West were taken in by guys like Mubarak, Gaddafi or Ben Ali telling us: it's us or the Islamists? If you want stability, it has to be us.

We lived side by side with this Arab Jurassic Park, with these dinosaurs in it, for decades, and now suddenly we're saying democracy is the only way to true stability. Do you feel bad about the way we viewed these societies just nine months ago?

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: I think there are lessons to be learnt, and one of them, of course, is that such repression is not sustainable, it will not ensure stability in the long-term, besides the fact that it is in contradiction with all the values we represent. I think that's a lesson learnt.

For me, that's an additional argument in favour of now making sure that we are, so to speak, on the right side of history, that we support the legitimate aspirations of people in North Africa and the Middle East. Their demands are equivalent to what they see flourish in Europe and North America.

ROGER COHEN: Mr Secretary General, I was struck in your speech that you didn't, unless I missed it, mention Islamists, Salafists, Al-Qaeda. Do you see in these situations, which are much more fluid than before, be it in Yemen, Libya, even Egypt, a danger that these terrorist or violent Islamist organisations will benefit from this fluidity and establish themselves and strengthen themselves? This is an argument made by many who take a more negative view of the Arab Spring.

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: Of course there is a risk, and the longer the turbulence and instability the bigger the risk that extremists and even terrorists will take advantage of and profit from this unstable situation. This is a strong argument in favour of a determined assistance from the world's

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democracies, assistance in the transition towards democracy, to ensure a rapid transition and orderly transition.

Having said that, we have to face the fact that there's always a risk that when you allow people to vote they may vote in a direction you don't like; that's how it is...

ROGER COHEN: And we should accept that?

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: Yes, with the following caveat...

ROGER COHEN: In Gaza we didn't really accept that.

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: No, exactly. ...with the caveat that democracy is actually much more than just majority rule. I would never accept that you, so to speak, suppress fundamental human rights by a majority rule. This is the reason why I always speak about not only freedom and democracy, I always add respect for human rights and the principle of rule of law, and these elements are important. Very often people forget to speak about human rights and the rule of law; they just speak about democracy, but democracy is not enough.

You need what I would call a democratic political culture, and that's much more than just a polling station. It is to infuse into society respect for minorities, respect for all the basic human rights, including women's rights...

ROGER COHEN: Presumably, you need democracy to create a democratic culture?

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: Yes, so this is [Inaudible]...

ROGER COHEN: You can't leave it to an autocrat to invent it.

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: No, exactly, and this is the reason why I suggested in today's speech that a NATO contribution could be to help reform the security sector and the military in transitioning countries. It goes without saying that if the military is not democratically controlled, if the security agencies live under cover, without democratic control, then you will not have a true democracy. That could be our contribution, but I think other international organisations have a major role to play, including the United Nations and the European Union. We are definitely not alone on the scene.

My point is, yes, democracy, in the sense of the right of the majority to elect their government, is fundamental, but democracy is much more, and we should help infuse that basic democratic thinking in these countries.

ROGER COHEN: Do you think these societies are ready for that democratic transition?

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: Indeed! As I said, I think these values are universal values; I would never accept the argument that there are regions or there are peoples in the world that are not well suited for having democracy. I would never accept that argument. I think the human desire for freedom is really universal.

ROGER COHEN: Do you have the impression that violent Islamism, Salafism, has, so to speak, passed its zenith in North Africa and the Middle East, even while in the AfPak theatre it remains extremely virulent? Do you feel that there are different trends in the two regions in that respect?

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SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: Yes, I'm quite optimistic about the development in North Africa and the Middle East, and I base it on the fact that neither religious extremism nor terrorism has been a driving force in the Arab and North African upheavals. On the contrary, the driving force has been a young generation interconnected through all the new media: the internet, the social media – Facebook, Twitter, all that – plus satellite television; they have watched with their own eyes how free societies can flourish and, quite naturally, they now demand the same opportunities. This has been the driving force and not terrorist ideologies or religious extremism, and all that makes me quite optimistic; so, yes.

ROGER COHEN: Why do you think the trend is different – just briefly – in AfPak? Is it because NATO's been there for so long, and that, in effect, is a catalyst to anti-Western extremism?

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: No, but we have actually succeeded in making progress in Afghanistan in the fight against terrorism. We have prevented Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorists, and we will stay committed until we assure that the Afghan society as such is, so to speak, inhospitable for terrorists.

I think all countries and regions are different; you can't make parallels from one region to another...

ROGER COHEN: Unless you're a columnist; then you have to.

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: Yes, I'm a columnist myself, so I'm not that impressed.

ROGER COHEN: NATO's offering to help here in the Middle East, but how does NATO avoid being seen as an instrument of Western oppression in Islamic society? You must be aware of this concern, of this danger. How does NATO convince Arabs that it's really on their side, that it wants to help them build more decent societies and not that it's just trying to impose a Western model on these societies?

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: First of all, let me point to the fact that the opposition in Libya, represented through the Interim National Council, appreciates the NATO-led operation over Libya. Actually, they have requested that assistance to protect civilians against attacks from the Gaddafi regime; that's the first point from real life.

Then, next, we are there on the basis of a United Nations mandate; the United Nations mandate is the operation on request from the Arab League. We get active support from partners in the region.

Finally, we have made very clear that we have no intentions to put boots on the ground. We are very much aware of the sensitivities in the region as to what might be considered a foreign military intervention, so that's actually not accusations we need. On the contrary, people appreciate what we do to protect civilians.

ROGER COHEN: I was just in Benghazi and certainly the sentiment there toward NATO is extremely positive.

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: It is, and right at the beginning of the operation there was some, I would say, very understandable impatience among opposition forces to make sure that NATO really made massive efforts to protect civilians. We have a very seamless, a very smooth interaction, I would say, with the aim to protect civilians, so the relationship is very good.

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ROGER COHEN: How do you think the Arab Spring is going to impact the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: There are, of course, two sides of that coin; on the one hand, in Israel – and I visited Israel recently – there are some concerns that a development towards democracy might create more instability in the region and make it more difficult to find a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. My argument is, in my talks with Israel, that in the long run, and as you have seen, suppression doesn't create stability. On the contrary, you will see upheavals...

ROGER COHEN: Suppression of the Palestinians?

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: No, suppression of people in the region...

ROGER COHEN: Including the Palestinians?

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: Yes, but that's a general attitude, so that's one side. On the other hand, by nature I'm an optimist, so I do believe that democratically elected governments in North Africa and the Middle East will understand how important it is for the whole region to create the conditions for a sustainable peace settlement between Israel and Palestine.

Think about the potential in the region if that conflict could be solved. Actually, Israel and Palestine together could create a centre of economic growth that could be to the benefit of the whole region. I do believe that once ordinary people's will is reflected at governmental level, the push for a peace settlement will be stronger. I know that, based on history, you might convey a lot of skeptical messages and arguments, but I tend to be optimistic also in that respect.

ROGER COHEN: Yes, I am, too. If there were peace, could there be any role for NATO, if invited, in underwriting such a peace... I know we're jumping forward here, but...

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: Yes, and I also have to say our hands are full, so we are not seeking new operations...

ROGER COHEN: Jordan River Valley?

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: ...but sometimes we are asked also from parties involved in this conflict. My cautious answer would be the following: if there is a peace agreement, if the two parties request our assistance, and if it is mandated by the United Nations, then I think we would consider it positively. You have these three ifs, and they are very important, so now I have broken my own rule never to answer hypothetical questions.

ROGER COHEN: Thank you very much, sir, it's much appreciated. Now, would anybody like to ask the Secretary General a question?

MOHAMMED-RAJA'L BARAKAT: Thank you, Mr Chairman [Inaudible]. My name is Mohammed-Raja'l Barakat. I would like to speak as a Euro-Arab citizen. Mr Secretary General, don't you think that NATO has to take into consideration the public opinion in Arab countries, especially after the uprisings which are taking place now in Arab countries?

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Arab people see NATO as a military organisation; do you think that for the new diplomacy it's better to keep diplomats playing their role in their region, especially after the bad experiences in Afghanistan and in Iraq?

Concerning democracy, I will be honest with you; when I was five years old I was living in [Inaudible]...

ROGER COHEN: I'm sorry, sir, could you keep it to questions? We have very little time.

MOHAMMED-RAJA'L BARAKAT: Yes, my question is about democracy. We have many people in Arab countries who finished their studies in European universities, American universities; we have enough money when we hear now about billions of dollars or euros in European and American banks. We have money, we have people who are able to make democracy; don't you think that it's better to keep Arab people installing their own democracy?

Egyptians are able to put President Hosni Mubarak in jail and to take tradition into a court. In Tunisia we have the same thing. In Jordan, during the two last years, King Abdullah changed twice the government because of people; people asked to change governments, and King Abdullah of Jordan changed the governments. Thank you.

They can make their revolutions, their democracy, their changes alone and for [Inaudible]...

ROGER COHEN: We have the point, thank you, sir.

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: Actually, my approach is very much the same: it is for the Libyan people to shape the future of Libya; it's for the Tunisian people to shape the future of Tunisia; etc, etc. That's very clear.

We also have a very clear division of labour between NATO as a military – not political, military – organisation and what you call the diplomatic track. The way we have organised it is that NATO implements the United Nations Resolution 1973; at the same time an international contact group has been established. Within that contact group politicians discuss how to promote a political solution to the conflict in Libya.

I think that's a way to handle it. I think the only way to develop a sustainable democracy in North Africa and the Middle East is to let people in each individual country shape their own future.

GEOFFREY VAN ORDEN: Secretary General, Geoffrey van Orden, member of the European Parliament, good afternoon. First of all, a comment: I'm delighted that we've seen European allies within NATO successfully operating, proving, really, the redundancy of European Union's common security and defence policy.

My question really relates to two NATO allies, first of all, Turkey; you mentioned Israel in the last part of your discussion just now - is there more that NATO can do to improve that difficult relationship now between Turkey and Israel? Where does Germany stand as far as intervention in Libya is concerned? Are the Germans now fully back on board? Thank you.

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: First, on the relationship between Turkey and Israel: it's not for NATO to engage in that; it's a bilateral question and we are not going to interfere with that. Having said that, of

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course I hope to see a positive relationship between Turkey and Israel, and, actually, I think it has improved.

On Germany, yes, Germany has joined the consensus within the NATO Alliance that NATO and partners took full responsibility for the operation in Libya. In that respect, Germany is part of the operation, like all other 27 allies and partners. Furthermore, Germany demonstrated flexibility as regards the AWACS surveillance aircraft; they switched their crew to do operations in Afghanistan so crews from other nations in Afghanistan could be transferred to the Mediterranean.

Within, I would say, the political framework in Germany, Germany actually demonstrated a lot of flexibility that made it possible for NATO and partners to take full responsibility for the operation in Libya.

BROOKS TIGNER: Brooks Tigner, Jane's Defence. I want to come back to Syria, and you mentioned there were two conditions they were not going to fulfil: the regional support and the UN mandate. That's an adequate answer but it's not sufficient, because if people are asking you this question over and over again, they want to know why those two conditions have not been fulfilled.

Leaving aside the regional support, on which you can't comment – I know that – you do however move in the policy circles of the UN, the EU, NATO, the OECD, and you hear what people are saying, but I'm wondering if you could perhaps give us some sense of why the international community is not moving toward a UN mandate against Syria similar to that of Libya. Thank you.

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: Actually, I think that question should be directed to members of the UN Security Council, but having said that, I should also add that we don't have the capacity to solve all crises in the world. I know that NATO is the world's strongest military alliance, but nevertheless it's not possible for us, so to speak, to travel from one country or one region to the next to solve crises. This is the reason why I offered what I called a pragmatic answer, because we have to evaluate each country and each case on a case-by-case basis.

The fact is that the Security Council, for good reasons, adopted a resolution with the aim to protect civilians. I think this principle, too, the responsibility to protect, is a very important principle, and it was an historic decision the UN Security Council took. This is the reason why NATO allies felt, and still feel, a responsibility to fully implement that UN Security Council resolution. That is a very important difference.

Actually, for us it has also been important that we have got strong support from the region as regards our operation in Libya. I have to stick with this pragmatic answer because we don't have the capacity to solve all crises in the world, and we are right now in Libya on the basis of a UN mandate.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE SPEAKER: [Inaudible], Security Policy Advisor to the German Parliament. Two questions; one is, in a Forum for New Diplomacy where's the new or possibly even the good old diplomacy in terms of crisis management in the Middle East, in Libya? In Kosovo [Inaudible] we saw several attempts to actually actively find a political solution by NATO member states or representatives from other countries – why don't we do it now?

Second question, with regards to RTP and double standards: why didn't we react to what happened in Bahrain? The name was not dropped so far. Are we at least talking privately to our Saudi Arabian partners that something may be wrong with this kind of approach?

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SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: First, on Bahrain: yes, we talk with all our partners, and we have conveyed the very clear message that the only way forward is to accommodate the legitimate aspirations of people in the region. We have conveyed that message to Bahrain, as well as to other partners and countries in the region.

Actually, we do actively pursue political solutions to the conflicts in Libya, and as I described it, the division of labour is that NATO conducts the military operation with the aim to fulfil the UN mandate 1973. At the same time, we have an international contact group that counts a number of countries, also countries that do not participate in the operation... I'm also a member of the contact group, so NATO is represented, but NATO allies do pursue political solutions through the contact group, but the contact group also comprises other countries. It is a real, true and broad international effort.

Obviously, there is no military solution solely to the conflict in Libya; we need a political solution, but to facilitate the political solution we must keep up the military pressure.

ROGER COHEN: One last question, please.

KAREL LANNOO: Karel Lannoo from CEPS in Brussels, a think-tank. Mr Secretary General, I was impressed by the fact that you insisted on Europe's role in this whole conflict, but what struck me a lot, apart from this no-vote or the abstention of Germany in the vote of the United Nations, is that Turkey was not invited to this Elysees meeting, which, in fact, was the start of the whole process.

Do you think, let's say, this division in the meantime has been overcome between Turkey and the rest of Europe, or do you think, let's say, that the damage done by this non-invitation by France towards Turkey is irreparable?

SECRETARY GENERAL RASMUSSEN: The fact is that Turkey has been strongly in favour of NATO taking full responsibility for the operation in Libya, so it is a united Alliance. Furthermore, I think Turkey, taking into account its geographical location, can play an important role when it comes to finding solutions to the conflict in Libya, as well as a broader engagement with countries in the region.

ROGER COHEN: Thank you. It remains for me to thank the Secretary General, a man, as you've seen, of passionate convictions about the spread of freedom in the world. I'd just like to add that, having been in Benghazi about three weeks ago and seen the carcasses of Gaddafi's tanks just 19 miles south of Benghazi, I have no doubt whatsoever, because history keeps getting rewritten, as it's always rewritten, that indeed NATO did stop an appalling massacre in Benghazi that was on the verge of happening, and also saved the people of Misrata. Thank you very much.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: Thank you.