

## Hope, struggle and change in the Freedom Crescent

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Ladies and gentlemen,

A year after the start of the Arab struggle for freedom and change, the EU's southern neighbourhood - North Africa and the Middle East - is in a process of deep political transformation.

We have only experienced the beginning of that transformation. And the road ahead will be full of challenges and uncertainties. We have yet to see the full picture.

But one thing is clear to me. The Arab Revolution is comparable in magnitude to the fall of the Berlin Wall: a landmark chain of events that profoundly changes the political, economic and social reality of a generation.

Like the end of the Cold War, the Arab Revolution represents an opportunity. A new global wave of democratisation has been set in

motion. New political systems that are more responsive to the aspirations of the people and their human rights are within reach. And at the same time, as with any revolution, progress is not linear and setbacks will occur.

Looking back on an eventful year, I would like to reflect on the dramatic developments and their implications for Swedish and European development policy towards the MENA region.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Arab Revolution took everybody by surprise, but the structural root causes behind the uprising were only too familiar: chronic abuse of power by authoritarian regimes, corruption and rampant unemployment to mention a few major factors. Add a growing sense of despair among the young generation under 20 (which makes up half of the 300 million inhabitants of the Arab world), and you have the ingredients of a perfect brew for political change. It was waiting to boil over.

When the young street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi immolated himself in protest against daily government harassments in Tunisia, he sparked an historic regional movement for change. The courage to overcome deep-

seated fears of repression made a powerful impression. And the persistent calls for dignity, justice and universal freedoms inspired a whole world.

Warnings by authoritarian rulers that al Qaeda-type terrorism would follow did not come true, as dictators were toppled in Tunisia, in Egypt and later in Libya. The repressive responses by several regimes have, however, shed new light on their poor human rights track records.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The structural factors for change that I have just touched upon only paint part of the picture. The Arab struggle has shown how citizens can empower themselves and unite for change in an unprecedented way by using modern information and communication technology (ICT).

Courageous activists like Lina BenMhenni in Tunisia, Wael Ghnomin in Egypt and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Tawwakul Karman in Yemen, to mention only a few, used these technologies of liberation to mobilize crowds and report on human rights abuses. Satellite media, with Al Jazeera leading the way, supplemented their live coverage and brought their unique perspectives to millions of people.

The Arab struggle thus entered the home of each and everyone.

The days when dictators could hide behind a monopoly of information are over. It was not a coincidence that in its dying days, the Mubarak regime tried to close down the Internet. Without ICT, we would know much less about the killings and torture perpetrated by the Assad regime in Syria. A repetition today of the massacre in Hama in 1982 would not escape international attention.

But freedom of the Internet and on the Internet is under challenge. My government has responded by making this issue a priority. Sweden has clearly stated that the extensive closure of the Internet is, in fact, a violation of the freedom of expression and information, established in article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Support for Internet activism forms an important part of my Government's policy on democratic development and human rights in Swedish development cooperation, a policy we have named "Change for Freedom".

Ladies and gentlemen,

The prospects of democratisation differ within the region. Last Saturday it was exactly one year ago that the dictatorship of Ben Ali was ended.

Tunisia has taken the lead as a source of inspiration. The main political parties there, regardless of ideological differences, have entered into a power-sharing alliance to write a new constitution and prepare for elections.

Egypt is of tremendous importance. After a long period of uncertainty about the timetable for democratisation – uncertainty that sadly has cost lives – it is positive that presidential elections will take place before June 30 this year. Having said that, the continued repression against demonstrators, the use of military courts to sentence civilians and the state of emergency are causes for continued concern. The recent crackdown on civil society organisations definitely sends a wrong signal.

But the spirit and courage I have personally experienced in meetings with Egyptian democracy activists in Cairo and Alexandria and the wisdom of

leaders to overcome and not exploit religious differences give me reason to be hopeful.

In Libya, the 42 years of Gaddafi's brutal dictatorship are finally over. A provisional government is now in place that must tackle the spread of weapons and take control of armed militias. A clear regional distribution of power and inclusive participation seem to be top priorities that should bode well when elections are prepared for a constituent assembly later this year. There is no shortage of financial resources. But the lack of state institutions and experienced civil society organisations and the scars of war are clear constraints.

My greatest immediate concern is Syria. I am extremely worried about the deteriorating living conditions of the Syrian people in localities affected by the unrest. There must be immediate humanitarian access to these areas. The Syrian authorities must stop their brutal repression and do their utmost to alleviate the suffering.

However, it is clear that the Syrian regime has not fulfilled its obligations to its people or to the international community, and it is painfully obvious

that it has no intention of doing so. The actions of the regime are utterly reprehensible, and the nations that support it – be it through the supply of arms or by blocking international action - will forever bear a burden of guilt for the thousands that have been slaughtered.

In this context, I'm very pleased that the UN via the OHCHR (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights), to which Sweden is a major donor, has offered to train the Arab League observers. With the right training, the observers would be able to carry out their important mission in a serious and professional way, allowing the Arab League to make a proper assessment of the situation on the ground in Syria.

By killing his own people and by clinging on to power, Assad is exposing Syria to threats of sectarian civil war. And the risk of potential regional spill-over should not be underestimated. President Assad must step aside immediately to allow for a peaceful democratic transition.

The EU position is crystal clear in this regard. We target the regime's ability to conduct its brutal repression. We work with the Arab League and others to increase the political pressure on the regime. We engage

actively with the opposition and encourage it to pursue non-violence, inclusiveness and democratic values. And we have stated our readiness to develop a new and ambitious partnership with a democratic Syria.

The Arabian Peninsula is also affected by the uprising, but the answers to popular calls for more freedom have varied. We have seen widespread repression in Bahrain and Yemen. Meanwhile, the response in other countries has taken the form of substantial economic subsidies and cautious reform.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As we enter 2012 there is an increasingly complex security and development policy agenda in North Africa and the Middle East. New questions are being added while the old ones – the Middle East Peace Process, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Western Sahara – remain on the table. These agendas are interconnected. And the degree of unpredictability is increasing.

One would hope that the regional developments would give an impetus towards a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Peace in the Middle East is a central interest for the European Union and for Sweden. We are eager to reach the stage where the State of Israel and an independent and democratic Palestinian state live side by side in peace and security.

As a major donor to the Palestinians, Sweden welcomes the impressive progress made in the Palestinian state-building project. We share the positive assessment that Palestinian institutions now pass the threshold of a functioning state.

But state-building must be paired with political progress. A real and lasting peace and a viable Palestinian state require a negotiated settlement. This requires a resumption of direct talks between Israelis and Palestinians, leading to tangible results. Sweden therefore supports the Quartet's results-orientated approach with clear timelines and expectations of concrete proposals. It is positive that the two parties have met recently, after a year without talks at the highest level. They must now show the necessary political leadership.

Building settlements on occupied territory is not only illegal according to international law, it also undermines the possibility of a viable Palestinian state and runs counter to long-term Israeli security interests.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Recent elections in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia suggest that Islamist parties will dominate politics when new constitutions are written. After decades of social work in silence, often in poor neglected areas, these movements are not tainted by the corruption and authoritarianism of the past regimes.

Their emergence on the political scene will likely cause much debate this year. Some, both in the region and in the West, may even question the value of democratic progress if Islamism is the result. I certainly hope that debate will be sober.

Islamist parties and movements differ greatly. There are moderate modern parties that take the Turkish AKP as an example to follow. And there are reactionary militant forces. The great dividing line in the MENA region in

the years to come will probably not be between Islamists and Liberals, but between moderate Islamists and extremist Islamists. This is indeed a challenge for us. A nuanced view and an ability to avoid stereotypes will be needed to better understand developments and support democracy.

In my view, it is vital that popularly elected parties are given the opportunity to shoulder the responsibility of government, show their true colours in public debate and be held accountable. Attempts to marginalise and exclude political parties, as in Algeria in the 1990s, would prove wrong.

And the democratic litmus test will not be the first elections. The challenge will come further down the road at the second and third elections, when new parties must respect the will of the people, accept defeat and go into opposition peacefully.

For Sweden and the EU, it will be important to have a dialogue with all relevant political forces that adhere to the principle of non-violence and respect human rights in words and deeds. It is only through cooperation and respectful dialogue based on our core values that we can foster

moderation. Questions of tolerance and minority rights will be at the centre of that dialogue.

Having said that, we should of course acknowledge that democratisation carries no guarantees. History is full of examples of democracy's dilemma. With the winds blowing in favour of Islamism, advances, not least when it comes to the rights of women, could be questioned and overturned.

Women have taken a prominent role in the Arab struggle and it is critical that their standing is advanced when new legislation is adopted. Let me in this context say how dismayed I am by the beating and humiliation of female demonstrators (in Cairo in December).

Supporting respect for women's rights and their participation in politics is a priority for Swedish development cooperation in the MENA region.

Gender equality is both an end in itself and a prerequisite for democratic development.

In the next couple of years, we will invest some 70 million kronor in projects that advance the standing of women and girls in North Africa and

the Middle East. That investment in equality makes Sweden one of the major donors in this key development sector.

Let me mention two different examples that show the breadth of our engagement. In one project we are supporting legal counsel for low-income, vulnerable women to make them more aware of their legal rights. In another, we are backing a network of regional women's groups that combat stereotypes in the media.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The transformation process taking place in the Middle East and North Africa is a long-term challenge for the EU. We have an historic opportunity to be a true partner for democracy.

Regimes that fail to listen to legitimate popular demands will no longer be accepted by the people. The EU will continue to support the calls for freedom and the people's own struggle is decisive. When required the EU will not hesitate to target oppressors with smart sanctions. Sanctions played an important part in the international protection of civilians in

Libya. When the Gaddafi regime could no longer use the financial resources it had amassed and import fuel for its war machinery, the opposition was finally able to free the country of tyranny. In Syria, EU sanctions targeting the Assad regime send a clear signal that violence must end.

But it is mainly by providing incentives that the EU can support its southern neighbourhood on the path to democracy. The principle of “more for more”, that is, to reward progress with deepened cooperation, is central.

Inclusive economic growth that brings new jobs to the rapidly growing young Arab population is key if the new wave of democratisation is to succeed.

It is, in this respect, an important signal that the EU has decided to launch deep and comprehensive free trade agreement negotiations (DCFTA) with Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan, as soon as the necessary preparatory work is completed.

Besides supporting democratic transition processes, institution building, the rule of law and market reforms, the EU also has a key role to assist civil society. A European Endowment for Democracy could increase the speed and flexibility of such assistance.

Looking back on 2011 Swedish foreign and development policy was largely focused on supporting democratisation and the respect for human rights in the Middle East and North Africa. We took our responsibility and participated with military resources under a UN mandate to protect civilians in Libya. And we were one of the major donors of humanitarian assistance to people in need in Libya and in Yemen. Violence, poverty and drought have led to a critical humanitarian situation in Yemen, which may deteriorate this year. Sweden will continue its substantial engagement to alleviate the suffering of the civilian population.

Besides cutting edge support for Internet activism and a substantial investment to promote women's rights, I would also like to highlight our contribution to strengthening transparent and well-functioning institutions, which are essential to democratic political systems and the rule of law. Sweden is a partner in UNDP's important democratisation

cooperation with Egypt and Tunisia, as these countries write constitutions and prepare for elections.

Our regional development cooperation - with a focus on human rights, democracy, economic growth and water management - increased by more than 75% (230 million kronor in total). With a growing need to support democracy and human rights in the region, this trend will continue in 2012. Earlier today I announced that I have decided to substantially increase Sweden's regional support to the work being done for democracy and human rights.

The thousands of young Arabs that have risked or lost their lives for liberty and democracy bring new hope to the Middle East and North Africa. 2012 will be a critical year towards realising people's expectations of greater freedom.

With our insistence on the rule of law and human rights and with our advanced development cooperation programme in support of change for freedom, Sweden is well positioned to be a long-term partner in that struggle.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In 1906 an American archaeologist named James Henry Breasted coined the phrase “The Fertile Crescent” to describe the archaeologically important area of present-day Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Israel. The region has commonly been defined as the “cradle of civilization”, and has witnessed the birth of much of our agriculture as well as many of our languages, religions and cultures.

Given the historic events that we have witnessed over the last year, it is my hope that we will one day also talk about “The Freedom Crescent”. A large, sweeping crescent of freedom and democracy that starts in Turkey - continues down over Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel and Palestine - turns the corner into Egypt and swings up to Libya, Tunisia and onwards.

I hope, and believe, that this region - “The Freedom Crescent” - will one day be for freedom and democracy what The Fertile Crescent was for civilization. Where there thousands of years ago were crops, cattle and farmers there will now be ideas, debate and activists - planting seeds of liberty and justice that will grow, flower and spread. The events of the

Arab Revolution have already inspired millions of people around the world. It has shown them that hope is alive, that their struggle is not in vain and that change is possible.

I'm not naïve. There is a long way to go and there will be many setbacks along the road. Much hardship and sacrifice remain for the peoples of the region. But finally, one day, they will win the freedom, the democracy and the promise-filled future that is rightfully theirs - and we will give them our support.

Thank you.