

**Amnesty International UK**



**Submission to the House of Commons**

**Foreign Affairs Committee**

**BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY AND THE “ARAB SPRING”**

**September 2011**

**Human Rights Action Centre**

**17-25 New Inn Yard, London EC2A 3EA**

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**Amnesty International UK**

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**Amnesty International UK:**

1. Amnesty International UK is a national section of a global movement of over three million supporters, members and activists. We represent over 230,000 supporters in the United Kingdom. Collectively, our vision is of a world in which every person enjoys all of the human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments. Our mission is to undertake research and action

focused on preventing and ending grave abuses of these rights. We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion.

**Introduction:**

2. Amnesty International UK welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the work of the FAC Committee ("the Committee") in its scrutiny of British foreign policy and the Arab Spring. The Committee plays an important role through its examination of British foreign policy and practice and the recommendations that it makes for its improvement. That it continues to undertake this work is vital to the continued accountability of the UK Government.

3. This submission addresses questions asked by the Committee on the announcement of this inquiry and is guided by the word limit set. As such, it does not include all of Amnesty International UK's observations and recommendations regarding the work of the UK Government in the MENA region. Amnesty International UK would be happy to submit additional information to the Committee if requested.

## **Summary:**

### **Forces driving the movement for reform and reconstruction in Egypt, Tunisia and in MENA region generally:**

4. Amnesty International believes that human rights abuses have combined to play a major role in fuelling the eruption of the protests and drive for reform in the MENA region. Detention without trial, torture, deaths in custody and curbs on freedom of expression and restrictions on assembly and association are common; long term poverty exacerbates the situation further. Amnesty International is concerned that the UK Government has not done enough previously to support human rights in the region and must reassess its approach by not over-looking human rights and repression in future.

### **Domination of British foreign policy by considerations of regional stability, counter-terrorist co-operation and commercial concerns:**

5. Amnesty International has long been concerned that a focus on security as a key part of the UK Government's bilateral relations with governments in the MENA region has been at the expense of diplomatic action in relation to ongoing human rights violations. The priority given to counter-terrorism co-operation over human rights is demonstrated by the pursuance of the policy of "deportations with assurances". Amnesty International calls on the UK Government to abandon this policy and instead work with and provide technical

assistance to MENA countries to ensure the eradication of torture in line with their international obligations.

6. Amnesty International believes that the UK Government's focus on arms sales to the MENA region both now and in recent years is completely at odds with its stated aim of upholding human rights. In our view the perceived commercial, economic, political and strategic importance of such sales appears to have unduly influenced export licensing decisions at the expense of adequate consideration of the human rights impacts of such sales. In particular, we believe that successive UK Governments, including the current UK Government, have not used adequate risk assessment methodology when granting export licences; we do not believe that the review of export licensing currently underway is satisfactory and hope that moving forward, a much wider and deeper review of export licensing policy and its implementation will take place.

7. The UK Government's strong emphasis on trade promotion, and the FCO's enhanced role in serving as a vehicle for the promotion of UK trade and investment overseas, carries considerable implications for human rights in the MENA region. While there is no reason in principle why trade promotion and human rights promotion should not co-exist as important functions of the FCO, Amnesty International does not believe that this can be achieved if the two policies are pursued in parallel to each other, without an understanding of the interactions between them. We are also of the view that there is a need for joined-up thinking on business and human rights across Government departments, without which positive steps taken by the FCO in pursuit of human rights can be undermined.

**Recommendations for British Government assistance to Egypt, Tunisia and other countries of the MENA region:**

8. Amnesty International believes that the reality of changing decades – even centuries – of autocratic and discriminatory rule in the MENA region requires commitment to the rule of international human rights law. Building accountable and transparent institutions of power will be vital, thus establishing a framework within which there will be no impunity for breaches of international justice and human rights. Amnesty International urges the UK Government to call for the revocation of all states of emergency and concomitant abuses of state power therefore; condemn all arbitrary detentions, torture and unfair trials; request that the judiciary be independent; and ask that state authorities consider establishing inquiries to investigate past abuses of human rights.

9. Of paramount importance in the process of change are the people of the MENA region themselves; their voices must be heard and not repressed. To ensure that this takes place, enabling people's participation in political processes – through freedom of expression, association, assembly and information – is vital. Amnesty International urges the UK Government to call for the reform of all security apparatus and justice systems therefore to ensure that they are no longer used by state authorities to crush dissent and silence critics; insist that all states guarantee that security forces do not use excessive force when policing demonstrations; demand that peaceful protesters are not arbitrarily

arrested and detained or tortured or ill-treated and insist upon the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information.

10. Finally, the role of women in the region is an essential component of the political agenda. Without change in the status of women in these countries, the peace, stability and development that are sought for everyone will be much harder to achieve. Challenges to women's rights vary significantly country by country as does the extent and degree of discrimination that women suffer. There are some very specific steps that the UK Government can take to address the situation of women in the MENA region, however, including; urging states to take the necessary steps to respect the rights of women as equal partners in shaping the future of their countries; insisting that all proposals for change are built on the principles of equality and non-discrimination; ensuring that there is a clear gender component to the Arab Partnership Initiative and requiring that women are not discriminated against in the provision of development assistance and in the process of economic reform.

## **Committee Questions:**

**1. What forces are driving the movement for reform and reconstruction in Egypt and Tunisia and to what extent are they paralleled elsewhere in the Arab world:**

11. The speed and extent of popular demands for change across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region appeared to take the UK Government and the rest of the international community by surprise. Yet Amnesty International has documented serious and extensive human rights violations across this region for many decades. Whilst exact circumstances differ in each MENA country, Amnesty International believes that these human rights abuses, including poverty-driven human rights violations, and unaccountable state power as well as rampant corruption have combined to play a major role in fuelling the eruption of the protests and the drive for reform we continue to see. We are concerned that if repression and the denial of human rights are allowed to continue, the prospect for these societies remains bleak.

### **1.1 Detention without trial, torture, deaths in custody:**

12. Detention without charge or trial, often in the name of state security, torture and other ill-treatment and deaths in custody, have long been an abiding feature of many of the MENA region regimes. Victims are often political activists who are detained, often at undisclosed locations, where they are subject to torture and held incommunicado for weeks – or often longer – at a time.

13. In Egypt, a 30-year national state of emergency equipped security forces with extraordinary powers of arrest and detention which they used to suppress legitimate political activities and freedom of expression. Police violence was endemic, torture and other ill-treatment was systematic and international fair trial standards routinely ignored. Emergency and military courts were often used to try civilians.

14. In Tunisia, the authorities arrested and detained thousands of people, many of whom were tried and sentenced in their absence in trials that failed to meet international fair trial standards. Defendants alleged that they had been forced to “confess” under torture or other duress while held incommunicado.

#### **1.2 Curbs on freedom of expression, restrictions on assembly and association:**

15. Freedom of expression has long been curtailed by governments everywhere across the region. So too have been the closely related rights to freedom of association and assembly, with state authorities impeding the development of human rights NGOs and an active civil society and seeking often to prevent public expressions of dissent.

16. In Tunisia, the authorities maintained a tight control over the media and internet. Those who openly criticised the government or exposed its human rights violations were harassed, placed under intensive surveillance, unjustly prosecuted, and physically assaulted. Many former political prisoners had their freedom of movement restricted within

Tunisia and were denied passports - most independent human rights organisations were denied official registration.

17. In Egypt, the authorities maintained curbs on freedom of expression and the media; government critics faced prosecution on criminal defamation charges; independent TV channels and programmes that criticised the authorities were taken off the air or suspended; and books and foreign newspapers were censored if they commented on issues that the authorities considered sensitive or threatening to national security. The authorities also maintained legal restrictions and other controls on political parties, NGOs, professional associations and trade unions.

### **1.3 Denial of economic rights, housing and livelihoods:**

18. The MENA region, like all others in the world, has not remained immune from the effects of global recession. Exacerbated by lack of infrastructure, corruption and misgovernment have bitten deep and led to a deeply unequal distribution of wealth. Severe impoverishment is common in many communities throughout the MENA region, with women often bearing the brunt of this hardship. Female unemployment figures are higher than those for men and in employment itself, women have suffered both wage and non-wage discrimination.

19. In Tunisia, high rates of unemployment and poverty, especially among the young, fuelled a sense of marginalisation and a demand for change. Mohamed Bouazizi's self-

immolation on 17 December 2010 in protest at his economic situation and subsequent treatment by the authorities was the ultimate protest in this regard. Previous protests at corruption and unemployment in the Gafsa region in 2008 were brutally suppressed by the authorities.

20. In Egypt, rising living costs, poor wages and poor working conditions, alongside an often ostentatious display of wealth by what is perceived as a corrupt ruling elite, provoked many – including an information-literate middle class and workers in the public and private sectors - to protest. An acute shortage of affordable housing has meant that over 12 million people are living in slums, half of them in the Greater Cairo region, many of them in areas even the authorities have designated as “unsafe”. Thousands in Cairo have faced forced eviction from these areas, many of which are reportedly earmarked for development and gentrification. Women are also discriminated against in the allocation of alternative housing.

**21. Recommendation: the eruption of protests in Tunisia, Egypt and many of the countries of the Middle East have, in Amnesty International's view, been fuelled by years of repression and human rights abuse. The UK Government has not done enough previously to support the eradication of human rights abuses in the region and must re-assess its approach by not over-looking human rights and repression in future. We recommend that the Committee put this concern to the UK Government and request it to set out how it proposes to support human rights in the region in the future.**

## **2. Was British foreign policy overly dominated by considerations of regional stability and counter-terrorist co-operation in the region rather than tracking popular opinion?**

22. In a speech to the British Council in London on 22 August 2011, the British Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, spoke about the Arab Spring. “The UK stands shoulder to shoulder with the millions of citizens across the Arab world, who are looking to open up their societies, looking for a better life”. Amnesty International disagrees that this has always been the case. In our view, the UK Government’s foreign policy has indeed been led by strategic considerations regarding regional stability and counter-terrorist co-operation – but would add also commercial considerations, particularly regarding arms sales and other business and trade opportunities generally. Of course, British foreign policy in the region has not been monolithic and has varied in some cases from country to country, but we do believe that it is possible to highlight these general themes.

### **2.1 Co-operation on security and counter-terrorism:**

23. Over the past decade, several countries within the MENA region assumed an increasingly important position within the UK’s strategic approach to national security and counter-terrorism. Amnesty International has long been concerned that this focus on security as a key part of the UK Government’s bilateral relations in the region has been at the expense of diplomatic action in relation to ongoing human rights violations - and has led to policies and practices which have undermined human rights. We believe that the

UK Government's failure to be more outspoken about human rights violations in countries which were seen as strategically important for counter-terrorism operations was an error of judgement which has been borne out in the popular uprisings of the "Arab Spring". A consequence is that the credibility of the UK Government is now damaged in the eyes of many people who have deposed leaders previously supported by the UK Government.

24. The priority given to counter-terrorism co-operation over human rights is keenly demonstrated by the pursuance of the policy of "deportations with assurances" and in the recent revelations of the UK Government's direct involvement in renditions to Libya. In order to deport individuals perceived to be threats to national security to countries where they would face a real risk of serious human rights violations, including torture, the UK has sought "diplomatic assurances" which seek to guarantee that the person deported will not face torture on return. In this respect, the previous UK Government negotiated "Memorandums of Understanding (MOU)s" with Lebanon, Libya, Ethiopia and Jordan and an "exchange of letters" with Algeria which would allow assurances to be negotiated on a case by case basis. Assurances have been sought but not relied upon in relation to deportation to Egypt. The current UK Government intends to continue this policy and is actively seeking to negotiate new "MOUs".

25. Amnesty International considers that the "deportations with assurances policy" is used as a means of circumventing the UK's obligation under international law not to return individuals to a real risk of torture or other ill-treatment. We believe that no system of post-return monitoring of individuals will make unenforceable diplomatic assurances an

acceptable alternative to rigorous respect for the absolute ban on such returns. The UK Government's position ignores the experience and concerns of international human rights organisations and ignores the context in which torture occurs in countries where it is systematic or widespread. The climate of secrecy, impunity and deniability in such situations as well as collusion up to the highest levels, means that assurances cannot reliably mitigate against the risk of torture and ill-treatment.

**26. Recommendation: the continuation and extension of the policy of Deportations with Assurances undermines the UK Government's claim to have human rights at the centre of their MENA foreign policy. Amnesty International repeats its call on the UK Government to abandon this policy and instead work with and provide technical assistance to MENA countries to ensure the eradication of torture in line with their international obligations. In addition, the forthcoming Detainee Inquiry must fully examine allegations of UK involvement in renditions to Libya in a manner which complies with international human rights law.**

## **2.2 Arms Sales:**

27. Amnesty International believes that the UK Government's focus on arms sales both now and in recent years to the MENA region is completely at odds with its stated aim of upholding human rights. All too often, perceived commercial, economic, political or strategic importance of such sales appears to have unduly influenced export licensing

decisions at the expense of adequate consideration of the human rights and other humanitarian impacts of such sales.

28. Equipment and components licensed for sale in the MENA region – including to Bahrain, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Egypt in recent years – includes small arms and ammunition, artillery, tear gas and crowd control ammunition, aircraft and helicopters, vehicles, weapons sights, night vision equipment and communications equipment. These are all types of equipment that are likely to have been used in serious human rights violations against civilians in these countries. This UK Government policy had a direct negative impact on the lives of those in the MENA region. We notice, for example, that the UK Government has repeatedly claimed that there is no evidence of UK equipment being used in Libya, yet we draw the Committee's attention to the video footage and photographs documented by Amnesty international showing distinctive armoured crowd control vehicles being used to crush protests in Libya in February 2011, crowd control vehicles licensed for sale by the previous government. We believe this is clear evidence of the use of British equipment against civilians in Libya. Amnesty drew the government's attention to this material in February 2011 - we are unclear on what basis this has been dismissed.

29. We also reject the basis on which the government appears to be justifying licensing policy. The system is not an evidence-based system, it is a risk-based system. The actual criteria used to grant licences stipulates that risk can be assessed by looking at the use of the equipment or similar equipment as one in a whole list of other relevant factors.

Evidence of the misuse of actual UK-supplied equipment is therefore not the threshold by which the arms sales should be judged but yet is repeatedly claimed by the government to justify its policy. We also point out that identifying items like ammunition, components and sub systems is clearly nearly impossible and that the assumption must therefore be that this equipment was used in the brutal suppression of human rights in the region that we have seen and continue to see.

**30. Recommendation: in our view, successive UK Governments, including the current UK Government, have not used adequate risk assessment methodology when granting export licences. We believe that is fundamental not only to look at evidence of misuse, but also to critically examine the capacity of the recipient to use and manage equipment lawfully and proportionally and to demonstrate its ability to implement international legal obligations and relevant standards related to the use of force. In short, it is crucial to act in line with the actual criteria used to grant licences and move from “evidence of previous misuse” to “risk and likelihood” in its risk analysis process, ensure that the context within which arms may be used is included in such analysis, take a longer-term and broader attitude to risk, better utilise external expertise and reduce scope for licensing decisions to give undue weight to political, strategic or economic factors.**

**31. We would also assert that we do not believe that the current review of export licensing has been conducted in an open, thorough and transparent way. Nor, in our view, has it involved adequate consultation with all relevant stakeholders in the process, including civil society, industry and parliamentarians. We conclude that to date, the review process has**

been deeply unsatisfactory - and hope that moving forward, a much wider and deeper review of export licensing policy and its implementation will take place.

### **2.3 Business and trade:**

32. The UK Government's strong emphasis on trade promotion, and the FCO's enhanced role in serving as a vehicle for the promotion of UK trade and investment overseas, carries considerable implications for human rights in the MENA region. UK companies' operations in the MENA region may have impacts that contribute to human rights abuses or that contribute to the protection of human rights.

33. For example, telecommunication companies such as Vodafone have been associated with attempts of the Egyptian Government to undermine freedom of expression. Mobile phone and internet technologies have created new frontiers for human rights. They provide a means for individuals and communities to participate in a free flow of information and ideas. However, in situations where governments in the MENA region are trying to suppress dissent, these technologies can be used for purposes of control and to restrict human rights.

34. Oil companies operating in the region are also at risk of contributing to human rights violations through their relationships with state security forces and private military and security contractors that offer protection services to company assets and employees.

35. In our view, the FCO should be providing guidance to UK companies operating in the MENA region that is much more specific to the human rights context of their operations. The material currently available, such as the *“Business and Human Rights Toolkit: How UK overseas missions can promote good conduct by UK companies”* published in 2009, is, in our view inadequate.

36. While there is no reason in principle why trade promotion and human rights promotion should not co-exist as important functions of the FCO, Amnesty International does not believe that this can be achieved if the two policies are pursued in parallel to each other, without an understanding of the interactions between them. We are also of the view that there is a need for joined-up thinking on business and human rights across Government departments, without which positive steps taken by FCO could be undermined by activities undertaken by bodies such as the Export Credits Guarantee Department or UKTI. The UK Government’s over-reliance on the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, a non-binding instrument that is lacking in country-specific or sector-specific guidance, does not provide an adequate response to the human rights challenges facing UK companies operating in the MENA region.

**37. Recommendation: UK companies operating within the MENA region, and delegations promoting trade to the region, should be made more aware by the FCO of the human rights contexts of particular aspects of trade and investment in countries of concern. This would require country desk officers and staff within missions to develop a strong understanding of how trade/investment and human rights intersect with each other. At the**

same time, the UK Government should consider and implement a wider range of measures to hold UK companies accountable for human rights abuses abroad.

**3. What specific assistance can the British Government give to help Egypt, Tunisia and other Arab countries build the institutions of democracy and civil society, and revive their economies? How can the British Government best work with allies and through international institutions to support reform in Egypt and Tunisia?**

38. The reality of changing decades - in some cases centuries - of autocratic and discriminatory rule in the MENA region will not happen over the course of months or even years. Hard work, determination and commitment to the rule of law by all concerned parties is what is now required to ensure that this happens.

39. Of paramount importance to this process are the people of the MENA region themselves. Their voices must be heard and not repressed. Only with their active participation can the right choices be made, country by country, as to how to proceed. Only by freely exercising their own expertise and skills will the societies that are now struggling to reform be both viable and sustainable.

40. Nonetheless, there are very specific steps that the UK Government can take to assist. It is within its power – operating both unilaterally and multilaterally - to do much to give the people of Egypt, Tunisia and other Arab countries the support they need. With this

support the prospects for establishing free and fair societies in which human rights flourish are much improved. Above, we have outlined what changes need to be made in the very specific areas of British foreign policy relating to counter-terrorism co-operation, arms sales and business and trade. Below we focus on the broader, big-picture changes that the UK Government can now do much to support in the countries of the MENA region.

### **3.1 Building accountable and transparent institutions of power - no impunity for breaches of international justice and human rights:**

41. In both Tunisia and Egypt caretaker governments have taken over from former regimes - and preparations for elections are under way. Amnesty International believes that real change requires that there is a clear break with the abuses of the previous regimes, however. In Tunisia, for example, an independent, thorough and impartial inquiry into human rights abuses committed under the rule of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali has not been called. In Egypt, the Emergency Law gives the security forces sweeping powers of arrest and detention and its recent extension further erodes the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly as well as the right to strike.

42. The situation is even more complex in Libya where NATO-led military intervention has assisted a total take-over of the state by armed opposition groups. Here, it is vital that the justice system is rebuilt so that those suspected of human rights abuses in the country can be charged and tried. An independent commission of inquiry to investigate past crimes and human rights violations may provide appropriate access to justice for victims of

crimes – reprisal attacks and arbitrary arrests under the current regime must also stop and be investigated. Women also must be included in the post conflict reconstruction process in Libya according to UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

**43. Recommendation: Amnesty International urges the UK Government to do the following – unilaterally and bilaterally - to ensure that abuses of human rights are not allowed to continue unchecked in the MENA region:**

- **Call for the revocation of all states of emergency and concomitant abuses of state power, including by operations of state security apparatus;**
- **Condemn all arbitrary detentions, torture and unfair trials and urge state or opposition authorities to halt their practice as a matter of urgency;**
- **Request that the judiciary in each country be independent, that judges are not subject to arbitrary disciplinary measures or have their judicial immunity revoked for their activities as judges; and also that women can serve in the role;**
- **Ask that all appropriate criminal or administrative measures against officials who fail to comply with safeguards against human rights abuses are taken;**
- **Urge implementation of recommendations on human rights by UN treaty bodies and special procedures;**
- **Urge that standing invitations are issued to all UN human rights experts and their visits facilitated as a matter of urgency;**
- **Where not already done, urge state authorities to sign and ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court;**

- **Ask that state authorities consider establishing inquiries to investigate past abuses of human rights.**

### **3.2 Enabling people's participation in political processes - freedom of expression, association, assembly and information:**

44. The elections that are soon to take place in Tunisia and Egypt as well as Libya in the near future are crucial steps in the process of ending the years of abuse that have taken place in the MENA region. Yet individuals and groups in both countries still experience restrictions on their freedom of expression and association. In August for example, 111 protesters who participated in a sit-in Tahrir Square, Cairo, were arrested and detained for four days in custody by the military. Also in August, four men were arrested following protests in Tunisia and risked facing trials before military courts.

45. The situation is even more dire in other parts of the MENA region where there has been no change in authority. One of many examples from Bahrain, was the arrest of two Bahraini MPs jailed during anti-government protests who may now be facing criminal charges for their actions. In the UAE, five activists were detained after calling online for democratic reforms. Their arrest comes as part of a wider clampdown on dissent in the country, where people can be jailed simply for the peaceful expression of their views. Yet more critical and on a truly shocking scale is the extent of political repression in Syria, where the situation continues to be dire. The attacks on and arrests of those taking part in peaceful protests against repression in the country are documented by Amnesty

International and others; we have recently reported how 88 people have died in custody from apparent torture and ill-treatment in the wake of sweeping arrests of protesters since April 2011 alone<sup>1</sup>.

**46. Recommendation: Amnesty International urges the UK Government to do the following – unilaterally and bilaterally - to support people’s participation in the process of political change in the MENA region:**

- **Urge reforms of all security apparatus and justice systems to ensure that they are no longer used by state authorities to crush dissent and silence critics;**
- **Insist that all states guarantee that all security forces, including the army, do not use excessive force when policing demonstrations and comply fully with international law in this regard;**
- **Demand that peaceful protesters are not arbitrarily arrested and detained, or tortured or ill-treated;**
- **Ask for the repeal or amendment, with a view to bringing into conformity with international law, provisions of any penal codes or laws that criminalise or infringe freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of assembly and freedoms regarding the flow of information;**
- **Insist upon the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of all frontiers and**

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<sup>1</sup> *Deadly detention: Deaths in custody amid popular protest in Syria:* to insert reference

through any media; and by refraining from imposing undue restrictions on internet and mobile telecommunications services;

- Demand that laws restricting or impeding or criminalising the functioning of non-governmental organisation be repealed or amended appropriately;
- Request an end to the harassment and intimidation of human rights activists and government critics, as well as arbitrary measures against individuals and associations who defend human rights, the rule of law, or the independence of their professions.

### **3.3 Furthering women's human rights - peace, stability and development:**

47. The role and status of women in the MENA region is often considered an extremely sensitive issue - outside the remit of international diplomacy and intra-governmental relations. Indeed, there are those who suggest that women's rights are also outside the remit of international organisations. And yet, the human rights of women – the world over – are based on international obligations, signed and ratified by many states. Not only are women's rights binding legal obligations, they are also vital components of the political agenda. Without them, the peace, stability and development that are sought for everyone in the region will be much harder to achieve.

48. The problems that women in the region face are not all the result of oppressive interpretations of religious teachings. Challenges to women's rights vary significantly and also relate to factors such as their ethnicity, religious affiliation and economic

circumstances, as well as prevailing social and cultural attitudes. The extent and degree of discrimination against women in both law and practice also varies significantly from country to country. In both Tunisia and Egypt, women were actually equal partners with men in the uprisings; out on the streets, protesting and demonstrating, being beaten, arrested and killed.

49. Whilst in Tunisia however, half the candidates standing in the upcoming elections have to be women, in Egypt, little or nothing has been done to ensure that women are able to play a role in reforming the Egyptian state. Women have been excluded from the Committee appointed to amend the Constitution and government measures that have been put in place are inadequate in ensuring the equal political participation of women. Both women and men marking International Women's Day on March 8<sup>th</sup> were subject to verbal and physical attack from onlookers. Female protesters arrested on 9 March when armed forces forcibly cleared protesters from Tahrir Square were subsequently subjected to "virginity tests". In addition, some fundamentalist groups are starting to question the rights that women already have, with women being told that now is not the time to focus on women's rights and that they are in any event expressions of a foreign or western agenda.

**50. Recommendation: Amnesty International urges the UK Government to do the following to support women's rights in the MENA region – and hence overall reform:**

- **Urge all states to take the necessary steps to respect the rights of women as equal partners in shaping the future of their countries;**

- Insist that all proposals for change are built on the principles of equality and non-discrimination;
- Raise women's human rights as part of their package of Asks vis a vis political reform;
- Ensure that there is a clear gender component to the Arab Partnership Initiative;
- Fulfil its obligations under UN Security Council Resolution 1325 regarding the involvement and treatment of women in conflict and post-conflict reconstruction;
- Support Women's human rights defenders throughout the region;
- Require that women are not discriminated against in the provision of development assistance and in the process of economic reform.

**Conclusion: from "interests" to "values":**

51. There is no doubt that events in the MENA region represent the greatest foreign policy challenge of this government to date, but also offer huge opportunities for the UK. Through the course of 2011, patterns of protest have emerged. The outcome of these protests is not in any sense uniform; in three countries, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, dramatic change has taken place, whilst other countries, like Jordan, have seen smaller levels of incremental change. In Syria and Bahrain, repression by state authorities has led to deaths and incarceration – and, we would argue, very little change by the respective authorities.

52. Amnesty International appreciates that UK Government policy in the MENA region seeks to enhance both Britain's security and prosperity interests. We hear also the UK Government's assertion that human rights are essential to and indivisible from these foreign policy objectives. The UK Government's approach to the MENA region is that such values and interests are mutually reinforcing – in our view, however, this will not always be the case and clearly has not, always been the case. There are occasions when in their diplomatic and other relationships the UK Government will have to make choices – occasions where “values”, Amnesty International argues, must and do come first.

53. Amnesty International also suggests that ensuring that UK Government policy in the region is genuinely effective requires that it engage not only with state and other authorities, but also with civil society. In some countries of the region there are long established and sophisticated networks of action and dissent. In others, the protests that we have seen gave voice for the first time to the voiceless – women, minorities, migrants – and the unemployed. The political and economic reform that the UK Government argues is the only guarantor of security and prosperity in the region cannot be achieved – and will not be sustainable - unless all these sectors of civil society play a role in and benefit from this reform.

54. It is also imperative that the UK Government takes a consistent approach to human rights across the region. Of course, we hope that Egypt and Tunisia – and now also Libya – will serve as role models for reform and human rights in the Arab world. But the task of those who seek this change will be made easier with the support of foreign governments

and institutions who also put values above interests. This will require a radical reappraisal of UK foreign policy and practice towards the region. We have outlined above what we believe this entails.

For enquiries about this submission, please contact:

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