

**Foreign policy address to the Storting  
Oslo, 14 February 2012**

**Middle East, North Africa**

During the last year, much of the world's attention has been on the popular uprisings and upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa – **the Arab Spring**. The situation today gives rise to both hope and concern for the future.

Economic realities are playing an important role and are driving developments. Dissatisfaction with the lack of development and high unemployment rates were important underlying causes of the uprisings. This again underlines how fundamental economic policy, organisation and distribution are for stability and political legitimacy.

The contrasts are great. Last year's events made it clear that when national leaders resort to military force against their own people, they themselves end up falling from power. And if the sparks created by dissatisfaction with the economy can start a fire, there are plenty of other sparks – in the form of corruption, systematic violation of human rights, nepotism and lack of democracy – to spread it.

Mr President, what we must realise is this: we are witnessing the start of a process of change in the Middle East region – not the end. More than 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the reverberations of that historic upheaval can still be felt in Europe. Radical changes to power structures and regimes do not develop in a straight line or follow a given schedule.

How should we respond to these changes? What line should Norway take?

Our approach must be based on the principles of democracy and human rights, and support for people's right to self determination as set out in the UN Charter. In the long term, only countries that respect fundamental human rights can contribute to a stable international legal order.

When people rise up against authoritarian leaders and demand reforms and universal rights, they should have our support. This cannot be dismissed as interference in internal affairs. At a time when the economy is global, we must underscore that these fundamental values are universal.

However, this does not mean that we should always respond or react in the same way: the circumstances and the broader context of each case as well as the underlying lines of conflict between social, political and religious groups are too different.

The use of military force by external actors is the most dramatic reaction. In most cases the use of force should only be resorted to after all other options have been exhausted.



There was an opportunity to prevent widespread atrocities against civilians in **Libya** through military intervention on the part of the international community. This had support in the region from the Arab League and was given the necessary green light by the UN Security Council. Norway played a part, following a longstanding position in Norwegian foreign policy of supporting the implementation of Security Council resolutions.

The most dramatic events are now being played out in **Syria** – a country that is a central player in relation to several power constellations in the Middle East. The internal conflict is already having reverberations in other tense situations in a region where states are still fragile. This could lead to extensive conflicts and could reshape the whole region.

There can be no doubt about the responsibility that rests with the Syrian regime for the atrocities committed against civilians, which the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has characterised as crimes against humanity. We deeply deplore and condemn these atrocities and hold the leaders in Damascus accountable for them.

The Arab League and neighbouring countries such as Turkey have sought to put an end to the atrocities against the civilian population, but the Assad regime has not given in to political pressure. The members of the UN Security Council have so far been unable to agree on a concerted response, which is highly regrettable. Now that Russia and China have vetoed the resolution on Syria in the Security Council, it is crucial that the international community maintains its commitment to finding a common, broad approach to resolving the conflict in Syria.

The Arab countries must be in the driving seat in this process. We attach great importance to how the countries in the region themselves view the situation, and particularly to the role played by the Arab League. At its meetings last weekend, it again asked for support for the Arab peace plan, requested the cooperation of the UN on a joint observer force, and demanded immediate humanitarian access to the Syrian cities that have been hardest hit.

These are all important proposals and should be considered carefully. The Government welcomes the initiative to establish a broad and inclusive group of friends to discuss solutions to the Syrian crisis. The Tunisian proposal to establish a group of friends in Tunis on 24 February could be an important step forward. It should be an inclusive group. A key topic for discussion should be the Arab peace plan for a peaceful, Syrian-led transfer of power.

Norway is following the situation in Syria closely. Our Embassy in Damascus is of great importance in this connection. It is in times of crisis that that a diplomatic presence is most necessary. The safety of the embassy staff is a high priority, and we are working closely with our Nordic neighbours in this context.



While the situation in Syria is the most dramatic, developments in **Egypt** – the largest country in the Arab world – are also of huge significance. A great deal is at stake here. The country's leader has fallen from power and a new parliament has been elected, but the new regime has not yet taken shape and political tensions are growing. We should actively encourage new political groups to become engaged, and we should share our experience and make quite clear the responsibilities that universal human rights entail.

Significant tension is also building up further east in the region, in and around **Iran**, particularly with regard to the uncertainty about the intentions behind the country's nuclear programme. But there are also underlying tensions within the country, where an authoritarian and brutal regime is oppressing the population. Iran's ambitions in the region and its visible intervention in many of the region's conflicts are making its neighbours uneasy.

It is Iran's responsibility to remove the uncertainty about its nuclear programme. No one contests its right to develop civilian nuclear power. However, there must be full transparency regarding its real intentions. This has not been the case, and the main responsibility lies with Iran. There are increasing indications that its leaders are taking systematic steps to develop a nuclear weapons capacity.

This is the challenge facing the international community. It is further complicated by a mutual lack of trust between Iran and much of the international community. The fact that there is virtually no meaningful dialogue gives serious cause for concern. Reactions and counter-reactions are increasing the tension; sanctions are provoking the regime to take a hard line – as illustrated by the continued development of its nuclear programme and its sabre rattling in the Strait of Hormuz – which is in turn increasing the pressure to impose new sanctions.

In this situation the door must remain open for negotiations. At the same time, the response of the international community must be consistent when binding resolutions are not complied with and confidence is undermined. This is the backdrop to the new, more stringent reactions against Iran. Norway has aligned itself with the EU sanctions regime, including the new, more stringent EU measures that were adopted on 23 January. We also support the EU line of strongly advocating negotiations. There is no military solution to the conflict over Iran's nuclear programme.

At a more general level, we are seeing another trend in the broader Middle-East region that requires a carefully considered response. This is the increasing importance of **political Islam**. When people are given the opportunity to vote, it is to the Islamic parties that the majority are now turning. The reasons for this are complex: they want better living conditions, and they are taking a stand against the former power elite. There are, of course, religious reasons, but this is also a matter of identity, respect for traditions and ordinary people's everyday lives.

What line should we take?



We cannot dismiss a majority vote. That would betray our own democratic principles and give the impression that the West has double standards.

At the same time, we must communicate clearly the values and norms that form the basis for the international community and express clear expectations about respect for human rights and the democratic rules of play.

If the new leaders are to meet the needs of their populations, they must introduce political and economic reforms, and participate openly in regional and international cooperation.

For example, it is clear that there will be no foreign investment in these countries – which is vital for them – unless steps are taken to address corruption and arbitrariness and create a predictable framework. It is important that the World Bank, the IMF and other organisations and actors make their knowledge and expertise available in connection with these reform processes so that revenues in these countries benefit the people.

And we must engage in active dialogue with those who are coming to power. Norway already has a strong platform and a good network in this context as, over the years, we have been in contact with the civil society actors that are now rising to power in the Middle East. We will make use of this.

Taking part in a dialogue does not imply that we share their political views. But it gives us an opportunity to put across clear messages, including in situations where we do not agree. In these dialogues, we draw attention to how fundamental values in our own democratic tradition – universal human rights and a modern social model – can be used to develop democracy.

We have long traditions of supporting civil society organisations that speak out for modern, democratic rights. Examples include support for youth organisations, the media, human rights organisations, support for election preparations and education. For example, Norway's funding through various channels for democratisation in Egypt amounts to around NOK 36 million.

We attach particular importance to protecting *women's rights*. It is also crucial that requirements are set for new legislation and not least new constitutions.

The extent to which *marginalised groups* and individuals are protected against discrimination is the litmus test of a state's willingness and ability to safeguard human rights. Protection of sexual minorities is one of the most obvious examples. We are putting a good deal of effort into helping to protect this vulnerable group, both in the UN and at country level, and this work will be continued in 2012.

Our efforts in the Middle East region are based on our long-term, broad-based *commitment to promoting human rights*. Norway's priorities in 2012 are as follows:



Firstly –supporting democracy-building, the rule of law and public participation, particularly in states in transition.

Secondly, protecting human rights defenders and freedom of expression. We will give priority to supporting spokesmen and spokeswoman who give a voice to vulnerable groups seeking to escape oppression and persecution. We see them in the media every day. All such efforts are dependent on the right to speak freely. It is essential that human rights defenders are able to do their work without restrictions, harassment or threats.

We will continue to support the training of journalists covering elections and protests in countries that have undergone major political upheavals during the past year. We support training in human rights and transitional justice after violent conflict. And we support dialogues between journalists in countries with a large Muslim population and Western countries, and between journalists in different parts of the Middle East with the aim of countering hate journalism.

Thirdly, abolition of the death penalty – an unacceptable form of punishment that violates the most fundamental right of all, the right to life.

The Government will be at the forefront of efforts to abolish the death penalty in the lead-up to the next World Congress against the Death Penalty, which will be held in Madrid in 2013. As part of a cross-regional core group of countries, we will mobilise high-level political participation, including from countries that have not abolished the death penalty. In October, Norway will assume the presidency of the Support Group for the International Commission against the Death Penalty. We will make active use of the presidency as a platform for our efforts in the time ahead, and will cooperate closely with civil society actors and NGOs.

Fourthly, Mr President, the protection of minorities, which is a field that is interlinked with many other areas. Minorities are vulnerable, particularly in times of political instability and economic and social unrest. The countries of the Middle East and North Africa are not alone in having experienced this. Europe, too, has dark chapters in its history, and today we are also seeing deeply polarised societies and minorities that are under pressure.

In November 2011, I announced that we would launch a project to strengthen protection of minorities. This entails an intensification of the work we are already doing – both in multilateral organisations and through awareness raising and other measures at country level. This is necessary. In our contact with political movements in Egypt, for example, we have raised the situation of the Coptic minority both with the authorities and with the Muslim Brotherhood, which recently won the election.

We must bear in mind that minorities are not a homogeneous category. We will focus on those areas where the challenges are particularly great and where there is broad engagement in Norway.



The protection of religious or belief minorities is one such area. The Government is concerned about the situation of Christians in these turbulent times. We are worried about the fact that many Christians who have lived in the Middle East for generations now feel compelled to emigrate from the region.

However, the Christians are not the only ones who are encountering difficulties. Every day there are reports of violent clashes between Muslim groups, such as the Sunnis and Shias in Iraq. The Baha'i of Iran and the Ahmadiyahs in countries such as Pakistan and Indonesia are other examples of religious groups that are that are in a difficult situation.

In our efforts to protect minorities, we must take care not to put them in even greater jeopardy by drawing attention to their situation and defining them as a group. Our focus should be to promote the development of states governed by the rule of law that ensure respect for the human rights of all people, both the majority population and minority groups.

Minorities are under pressure in most of the regions of the world, including Europe. This may be because of religion or belief, ethnic affinity, gender identity or other, more complex factors. We are seeking to gain greater insight into the historical background, local knowledge and the skills needed in order to make a useful contribution. Organisations such as the UN, the OSCE and the Council of Europe are central arenas for following up this work.

The UN Human Rights Council is about to begin its second round of Universal Periodic Reviews. We will take up the situation of religious minorities in certain countries both in this process and in our general statements when the situation in various countries is discussed in the Council. Our diplomatic and consular missions are charting the situation of minorities in the respective countries, which will be used as a basis for defining our role and the measures we intend to implement in cooperation with Norwegian and international organisations and educational and research institutions.

Before leaving the subject of the Middle East, I would like to say a few words about what is probably the most central conflict in the region – that between **Israel and the Palestinians**.

The news is not encouraging. The situation seems to be even more deadlocked and, if anything, it seems to be characterised more by deeper internal divisions within both parties than any form of rapprochement between them. The core of the conflict remains unchanged, and the occupation continues and is being reinforced by an expansive settlement policy and measures to drive Palestinians from their land. At the same time, the Palestinians remain divided. There have been various signs of reconciliation, but it seems that there is still a long way to go.

Last year the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee for Assistance to the Palestinians (AHLIC), which is chaired by Norway, concluded that the Palestinian Authority is above the threshold



for a functioning state. Robust Palestinian institutions are now delivering public services that are on a par with those provided by comparable institutions in other countries. Thus, despite the fact that there are still a number of unresolved issues, Palestine fulfils key criteria for becoming an independent state.

Norway supported the Palestinians' legitimate right to bring its case before the UN in autumn 2011, and is ready to recognise an independent Palestinian state. In the Government's view, the basis for recognition must be its ability to function as a state. We underscore, as does the Palestinian leadership under President Abbas, that outstanding issues must be resolved through negotiations. It is urgent for the parties to start negotiations. The very vision of a two-state solution is now in danger. Both the Palestinians and the Israelis are losing any hope of peace because of the lack of progress. This is bolstering extremist forces on both sides. Although the international community must continue to play a clear role, it is the parties themselves that have the primary responsibility. Norway will continue to support all efforts to bring the process forward in the coming months.

The Palestinian Authority is facing major challenges. The economic barriers created by the occupation are still in place and donor funding is declining. An economic crisis could endanger the Palestinian Authority's existence, which would hit the people of Gaza particularly hard.

As chair of the AHLC, Norway will assist the Palestinian Authority as it continues its state-building project. Norway will co-chair the next donor conference, which will be held in Brussels in one month's time, together with EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Catherine Ashton.

Palestinian reconciliation is a necessary precondition for a viable Palestinian state and a lasting peace. This is President Abbas' aim. There must be no doubt that he is negotiating on behalf of all the Palestinian people. We expect any Palestinian government to respect previously concluded agreements, including the Oslo Accords, that require the parties to seek a peaceful solution to the conflict and recognise the state of Israel.