

The Changing Arab World and the UN's Political Response:

Interview with USG B. Lynn Pascoe

B. Lynn Pascoe has served as Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs through the first term of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, spearheading efforts on the UN chief's behalf to sharpen the use of instruments such as preventive diplomacy and mediation to respond to crises around the globe. These capabilities were sorely tested again in 2011 across a range of global hotspots, including the Middle East and North Africa.

In an interview* as the year drew to a close, USG Pascoe described the UN's political response to the dramatic upheavals still playing out across the Arab world. This includes the outspoken messaging of the Secretary-General, the dispatch of envoys, mediation and electoral experts to countries requesting UN assistance, the UN's close cooperation with regional organizations and the deployment in Libya of the UN's newest political mission.



UN Photo

B. Lynn Pascoe

Q. *This year brought historic change to the Middle East with the Arab Spring movement spilling over from country to country, shaking or even dismantling established structures. How has the United Nations responded?*

Most importantly, the Secretary-General decided from the outset of the Arab Spring that the United Nations should be on the side of the people and the side of modernization. The old notion that somehow the Middle East was an exception, that it was not cut out for democracy, had always been a foolish one. The UN, therefore, supported the aspirations of peaceful protesters and their calls for reform throughout the region,

starting with Tunisia, followed by Egypt and then Libya. In countries like Bahrain, Yemen and Syria, the Secretary-General has repeatedly called on leaders to respect human rights and to respond peacefully to the legitimate aspirations of their people for change.

Q. *How did the United Nations react specifically to the different challenges in these countries?*

The UN's response has varied according to the unique circumstances in each country. In Tunisia, for example, the UN was deeply involved in the preparations of the October elections. The Department of Political Affairs (DPA) worked with the

UN Development Programme (UNDP) to deploy electoral experts to Tunisia, and provide first-hand assistance to the national election authorities. This was a Tunisian-led process that worked very well and led to successful parliamentary elections in October. The enthusiasm of the Tunisian people in expressing their will through the ballot box was an inspiration to the whole region, and particularly Egypt, where the UN has also provided electoral assistance.

Q. *Libya posed a more complex challenge. What would you highlight there?*

First, there was an immediate need to alleviate the suffering of the refugees fleeing from the zones of combat to the Tunisian and Egyptian border. Second, the Security Council clearly expressed the need to maintain a mediation effort to see whether an agreement between the opposition and Qaddafi could be achieved. The Secretary-General appointed a high-ranking diplomat, former Jordanian Foreign Minister Abdel-Elah Al-Khatib, to lead this effort with substantive and logistical support from DPA. At the same time, the Secretary-General tasked DPA with planning for the post-conflict situation in Libya, whether mediated or following the fall of Qaddafi. The process led by the Special Adviser for post-conflict planning, Ian Martin, moved forward rapidly and brought together the whole UN system. As Tripoli fell and the Security Council decided in September to establish the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), Mr. Martin, the new mission's head, was already on the

ground in Tripoli with an advance team and with a very clear idea of what kind of support the transitional authorities in Libya would request in order to best help their people.

Q. Why the decision to establish UNSMIL as a political mission as opposed to a peacekeeping mission?

A mission has to fit the needs of the country and its people. We talked with the Libyans about whether they would need some kind of stabilization force after the conflict, but they made it very clear that they would be in charge on the security side and they have managed it quite well. Where they wanted help from the United Nations was with the coordination of international assistance, and with expertise on issues such as elections, governance, constitution-making, the control of arms, and on the formation of a professional police force and army. Qaddafi had basically eliminated institutions. For all of these reasons, a political mission was the logical choice.

Q. In Syria, clashes between the security forces and protesters have already killed thousands. Will we see a similar role for the UN?

We have to be flexible and adapt our response to the needs of each particular situation.

On Syria, it is no secret that the Security Council has been divided, and this has limited its range of action. At the same time, the Secretary-General has spoken out repeatedly for an end

to the violence and for genuine democratic reforms. He has been in constant contact with the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, offering support to the League's efforts to stop the bloodshed and resolve the crisis in Syria. We have also worked in close



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon at the High-Level Meeting on Reform and Transitions to Democracy in Beirut, January 2012. UN Photo

cooperation with the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights.

Q. The UN has also had a significant role on Yemen. What are the challenges there?

The situation in Yemen is highly complex. Atop the multiple conflicts already present in the country, the Arab Spring added a new dimension in the form of a political crisis over demands that the long-standing President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, step down and institute reforms. Violence surged and the humanitarian situation deteriorated. The Secretary-General made his diplomatic good offices available in support of regional efforts to resolve the crisis, deploying a Special Adviser, Jamal Benomar, supported by DPA. His diplomacy between the competing groups in Yemen helped to produce in November a

political transition agreement providing for elections in early 2012 and a two-year political transition process. This is intended to move Yemen toward greater democracy and the peaceful resolution of its conflicts. The UN will be working in the period ahead to support this process and ensure it is inclusive and respectful of human rights.

Q. Transitions in the region are still unfolding, in some cases marred by violence and setbacks. How confident are you that the changes set in motion by the Arab Spring will be consolidated and endure?

While the new order in this region may take a number of years to emerge,

I believe the old Middle East is dead and is not coming back. Even some of the more conservative actors in the region realize they need to make changes. Governments have to prove they are actually working for the people. Where this is not the case, people are no longer afraid of the suppressive apparatus of the state. They are willing to fight for their rights. Without interfering, the challenge for the United Nations and the international community is to effectively support these historic transformations which have come so suddenly and represent such a fundamental break from the past. 🗨️

** This interview also appeared in the United Nations Peace Operations Year in Review, 2011. Department of Public Information. Available at www.un.org/depts/dpa*