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Project on Middle East Democracy, Freedom House, and the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East Present:

“Beyond Benghazi: Libya’s Transition and the Future of US-Libyan Relations”

Atlantic Council Headquarters

Tuesday, September 10, 2013

One year after the deadly attack in Benghazi that claimed the lives of Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans, the Libya Working Group—a joint initiative of the Atlantic Council’s Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, the Project on Middle East Democracy, and Freedom House—[convened](#) a panel discussion entitled “Beyond Benghazi: Libya’s Transition and the Future of US-Libyan Relations” to assess developments in Libya and the role of the United States and the international community in supporting its democratic transition. Dr. **Karim Mezran**, Senior Fellow at the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council moderated the discussion. Dr. **Mustafa Abushagur**, former interim deputy prime minister of Libya and chairman of a Tripoli-based think tank; **Manal Omar**, Director of Iraq, Iran, and North Africa programs at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) Center for Conflict Management; and Ambassador **William Taylor** of USIP, and previously the first special coordinator for Middle East transitions at the US Department of State shared their insights and assessments of the dynamics in Libya. **Charles Dunne**, Director for Middle East and North Africa programs at Freedom House gave introductory remarks.

For full event notes continue reading or [click here](#) for the pdf.

Charles Dunne argued that despite many events drawing attention in the Middle East, **maintaining focus on Libya is essential to both the Libyan transition and international stability**. Dunne summarized five key recommendations made in [a policy letter addressed to John Kerry](#), released by the Libya Working Group on Tuesday. The letter lays out a series of five policy recommendations to increase U.S. engagement in Libya including: support for the National Dialogue initiative to empower diverse voices and incorporate expensive outreach to each region; pledge support and expertise for the constitution writing process; expand cooperation and funding to address justice and security sector reform; increase diplomatic engagement and public diplomacy, including a visit by Secretary Kerry; and encourage the Libyan Government to resolve contract disputes and sign OPIC and Ex-Im agreements. Dunne concluded by noting that **these actions would constitute, “an important step forward in U.S. policy towards the promise—not just of the Libyan transition—but of the promise of the Arab Spring.”**

Mustafa Abushagur discussed the internal developments in the country from his perspective as a high level observer. Dr. Abushagur said that Libya’s “glorious revolution” had made unprecedented steps towards democracy and noted that while the General National Congress (GNC) faced ongoing challenges—including unachievably high expectations on behalf of the public to see immediate results—that such challenges cannot be overcome in only two years. According to Dr. Abushagur, security is the primary challenge, as **“the government does not have the force to enforce law in the country.”** The government has no formal military, and government-backed militias (known as Shield Brigades) are untrained groups of revolutionaries who ally with the government “when convenient for them.” Dr. Abushagur noted that security concerns, in addition to other major concerns such as slow economic growth, and the closure of oil fields can only be resolved through the National Dialogue. On political

developments, he argued that time constraints on the constitution writing process should be removed to allow sufficient deliberation, and a national dialogue should take place on the constitution itself in order to increase participation in the new democracy. Dr. Abushagur concluded that he is optimistic about the future of Libya's democratic transition.

Manal Omar struck a note of cautious optimism by calling Libya one of the most successful Arab spring countries, highlighted the major successes and ongoing challenges of the revolution, and discussed the critical importance of Libya to the United States. Omar argued that the number of transitions in Libya through institutions—rather than in the streets—in the aftermath of the Arab Spring is evidence of support for developing institutions in the country, and praised civil society development and the announcement of the National Dialogue initiative as key steps towards progress. Turning to remaining challenges, she agreed with Dr. Abushagur that resolving security concerns (particularly concerning border tensions and reconciliation), managing high expectations, facilitating economic growth and overcoming the mentality that “the government should be the primary provider” are crucial to the democratic transition. Omar also explained that successful democratization could provide insight into the effectiveness of light intervention as a strategy for carrying out the responsibility to protect by demonstrating the **U.S. can “build partnerships...without having to commit to a large programming in the country or on the ground.”**

William Taylor agreed that Libya is an important country for the United States and others in the region, and said Libya does have the capacity to be a success, and therefore needs support from the United States. Ambassador Taylor advocated that the current United States policy to provide assistance on a “demand-driven basis” for military training and border security assistance, civil society and election support is a productive strategy in Libya.

In the Q&A period, the panel offered opinions about strategies to enhance the effectiveness of international assistance. Dr. Abushagur explained that the international community is failing to provide security and constitution writing expertise, and urged further support. **Karim Mezran bemoaned weak participation in the GNC as a challenge to the legitimacy of the new government;** Manal Omar elaborated that **coordination between international organizations needs to be enhanced** and emphasized Abushagur's argument that Libya understands the concept of achieving security through national dialogue, but has struggled to find international support that can assist with putting that into action. William Taylor argued that **the host country must become the driver of international coordination.** Panelists also addressed questions about training troops in the military, border security, economic development, resolving the difficulty of maintaining governmental legitimacy during a lengthy constitution drafting period, and overcoming political opposition to funding democracy assistance to Libya in the aftermath of the tragic attacks on the American Consulate in Benghazi.