

15 August 2019

## Responding to a Revolution



**Chris O'Connor OBE** is a senior strategist now based in Vancouver having most recently been UK Consul General in Los Angeles. He is former UK Ambassador to Tunisia (during the Arab Spring) and also has expertise in Lebanon, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. His passion is to bring innovative West Coast thinking to address geo-strategic and commercial challenges in the Middle East and North Africa.

\*\*\*\*\*

*In January 2011, a revolution in Tunisia overthrew the regime of then President Ben Ali, plunging the country into uncertainty. Its wider ramifications including copycat uprisings in Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria came to be known as the 'Arab Spring'. Chris O'Connor OBE was UK Ambassador in Tunisia during the revolution there. Here he offers his thoughts on what he learned about leadership in uncertain and demanding times.*

### **API: Was the revolution expected?**

No. Some people like to say with hindsight that it should have been. But it wasn't. We all knew a revolution was possible, as it is on any day in any country which lacks the flexibility to hear and respond to public anger. But in most oppressed countries on most days, revolutions don't happen. No-one in Tunisia or elsewhere saw it coming in the months or even weeks before. Not even the people who made it happen. Until around 10 January their demand was for permission to express their frustrations and an end to corruption. By 14 January, the president had fled.

### **API: Did you have contingency plans?**

Yes. We had trained all staff in crisis roles, identified a safe fall-back location as an alternative HQ, drawn up check lists and contact lists, stashed spare cash, documents, food etc. Without doing those things, everything would have been more difficult.

### **API: What was your top priority at that time?**

The police had been overthrown and unidentified groups were looting and ransacking buildings for reasons we did not then fully understand. Some of the presidential guard were using heavy firepower to try to cause chaos and panic in the hope that people would ask the ousted president to return. So the safety of my staff and their families was the top concern. We focused wholeheartedly in the first few hours on evacuating the families and any staff who didn't want to stay. The core team was then able to focus single-mindedly on everything else.

**Access. Engagement. Resolution.**

***API: What were the key things that you had to get done?***

On a practical level, we evacuated all British citizens who wanted to leave, including over a thousand tourists. We also worked with the army to ensure highly vulnerable UK targets (including a major British Gas installation) were safe. At more macro level, I advised the Prime Minister and other UK ministers on how they should respond: Keep our heads down? Condemn those participating in unlawful demonstrations? Or applaud those demanding freedom? We chose the latter. And then we offered actual help to those taking responsibility for finding a democratic path forward. We trained rookie politicians and newly un-muted journalists. We provided support to emerging NGOs. We mentored and supported a group of activists who came forward to draft a new national constitution. But we didn't do any of these things alone. We aligned from the start with others sharing similar goals.

***API: What were the hardest aspects of the experience?***

Worrying about the safety of your staff is no fun. Nor is turning down requests to spend time on things that are really important but not important enough to make the cut. Going to bed and leaving the night shift to an empowered deputy can be hard too. But overall the positives are what stick in the mind. The way the team rises to the challenge. The feeling of making a difference on something that matters. The heroic acts of individuals.

***API: What would you do differently next time?***

I'd focus the contingency planning more on practicalities. Who has the spare key to the emergency supplies cupboard? How do you re-programme the phone switchboard remotely? Who has the local police chief on speed-dial? The best strategic vision in the world is only as good as your ability to make it happen.

***API: What advice do you have to others on leadership in a crisis?***

- Prepare well for all credible scenarios, whether you actually expect them to happen or not. Remember the nuts and bolts. How will you organize your response and lead your team when the power or phone connections go down?
- Summon your whole team and then send half of them home before doing anything else. You will need them to take over in 12 hours' time when your first team are exhausted.
- Keep your eye on what matters most. Depending on the scenario it might be staff safety, or ramping up responses to concerned customers, or reassuring stakeholders that someone is in charge and yes there is a plan.
- Empower your team. You don't want a queue of people waiting at your door for permission to take action while you are on the phone to the Prime Minister.
- Accept help where it is offered. Involving new people can complicate things. But others will have expertise you don't have, and the capacity to do things you and your team don't have time to do.
- Don't sweat the small stuff. Balls will be dropped and mistakes will be made. Some things won't get done. If the big things are done right, the rest will be forgiven.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Access. Engagement. Resolution.**

The Ambassador Partnership LLP is a **unique specialist** partnership of former Ambassadors with unrivalled networks of influence in almost 100 countries. We provide discreet services to resolve your international problems and to improve your capacity to operate effectively wherever you need to.

We are **dispute resolution** specialists and **political risk** experts.

To discuss how we can help you to manage your political risk please call:

**Tracey Stewart**

Partnership Secretary

+44 (0) 7950 944 010

[tracey.stewart@ambassadorllp.com](mailto:tracey.stewart@ambassadorllp.com)

[www.ambassadorllp.com](http://www.ambassadorllp.com)