

**House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**Human Rights and U.S. Policy in the MENA Region Ten Years After
the Arab Spring Hearing**

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Co-Chairs McGovern and Smith, distinguished members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, thank you for inviting me to testify at today's hearing.

The topic of today's hearing is both important and timely. While Congress has held numerous hearings addressing specific countries and issues, adopting a regional framework offers us the opportunity to examine broad currents that have manifested themselves in the past decade in a region that despite arguments about its diminished importance to U.S. interests, remains central to the world's stability and economic prosperity as the 2015 European refugee crisis and the more recent blockage of the Suez Canal have proven. A United States that seeks to engage with the world and navigate both a post pandemic world and the rising challenge posed by authoritarian competitors from Russia to China cannot ignore the Middle East. With a new administration that promises to put human rights at the central stage of its foreign policy, a discussion of human rights conditions in the Middle East and ways to address them is vital.

It is especially appropriate to tie the discussion to the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi and the subsequent upheaval that the Middle East has witnessed for the past ten years. What started as one man's desperate act in the face of injustice in Tunisia, soon acquired nearly unstoppable power as millions across the region, frustrated with their countries' political and economic conditions, joined in demanding change to the status quo. But instead of ushering in a new era of democratic transitions and greater freedoms, the Arab Spring, with few exceptions has not only resulted in

maintaining the status quo of regime oppressions but even led to the worsening of human rights conditions across the region.

With the exception of Tunisia, where the democratic transition remains fragile amidst a deepening economic crisis, political infighting and popular discontent of a population that has grown disillusioned with the political process, political and human rights conditions have worsened in all the countries of the first wave of the Arab Spring. In both Bahrain and Egypt, whatever political openings and room for the growth of civil society existed prior to the Arab Spring, has now completely disappeared. Instead, both countries have witnessed a crackdown on all forms of dissent, especially in Egypt, where the regime has attempted to completely close down the public space and monopolize sources of information in order to control the narrative. And despite the different fates of the regimes ruling Libya, Syria and Yemen, the three countries have been engulfed in civil wars that have attracted regional and foreign intervention. Any hope for greater freedoms has been sidelined amidst sectarian clashes and the savagery unleashed by the bloody conflict in those countries.

Similarly, the countries of the second wave of the Arab Spring have not fared much better. The one exception has been Sudan, which despite the tremendous challenges it faces, has managed so far to set its course on the right path, though the democratic experience in the country will need significant Western support both economically and politically if it is to survive. In Algeria, the removal of President Bouteflika did not bring about any significant change as the military establishment reasserted its complete control of the country. And in both Iraq and Lebanon, popular protests have failed to change the status quo.

This deterioration in human rights conditions and political freedoms across the region has also taken place in non-Arab Spring countries such as Turkey where the country's democratic institutions have crumbled under the assault of an increasingly authoritarian Erdogan. Overall, the Middle East remains one of the least democratic regions across the world with freedoms of religion and speech nearly completely absent.

Yesterday President Biden declared that the United States went back away from its commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms. If the United States is to pursue a foreign policy that is rooted in its values and that seeks to improve human rights conditions in the Middle East and open

the doors for democratic reforms, beyond rhetorical statements, it must grapple with the legacy of the Arab Spring and the fissures the past decade has exposed in both the Middle Eastern state and the regional order as a whole.

The Crisis of the Modern Middle Eastern State

While the protests that spread across the Middle East in 2011 were driven by economic and political frustrations, the events of the Arab Spring were shaped by the crisis of the modern Middle Eastern state. The seeds of the collapse of the modern state in the Middle East were sown from the start. Borders were drawn without the consent of the governed ignoring the diverse populations' own aspirations, regimes were formed to serve a smaller tribal, ethnic or sectarian loyalty instead of the state, and resources were monopolized by those in power. But while the demise of order in the region is certainly rooted in the crisis of modernity and the inability of the Middle Eastern political order to confront that crisis' existential questions, the current collapse was neither predestined nor inevitable but rather the outcome of human choices made by the region's rulers, intellectuals and peoples.

The fundamental problem that states across the region have not, with few exceptions, been able to address is their failure to make their citizens believe that the state was theirs. This flaw was not limited to those states where the ruling elite belonged to a minority group or sect such as the case of Sunnis in Iraq and Alawites in Syria. Nor was it limited to countries where a minority ethnic or religious group was suppressed by the state such as Kurds in Iraq, Syria and Turkey or Shiites in Saudi Arabia, Amazigh in Algeria, or Christians across the region. This flaw was also true in countries where no such clear ethnic or religious divides shaped the ruling formula such as Egypt. In nearly all Middle Eastern countries post-colonial regimes have failed to turn their subjects into citizens and to make them believe that the state was serving their interests. Whether one belonged to a majority or minority ethnic or religious group, or whether one belonged to a more homogenous society where the question of identity was less powerful, whether one was a young man frustrated by his poor prospects, or whether one was older and looking for feeding his family, the modern Middle Eastern state failed in creating a sense of nationhood and belief that the state was representative of the population.

Explaining the Revolutions: The Regimes' perspective

While the countries of the region differ in the structure of their political systems, ethnic and religious compositions, and economic conditions, a cross regional narrative attempting to explain the events of the past ten years has taken hold. While this narrative sometimes acknowledges that conditions prior to the uprisings were not perfect, the size of the public discontent and the fact that it was cross-regional is viewed as non-organic. Instead, the revolutions are perceived as part of a larger plot against the region, or more specifically Arabic majority countries by sinister foreign actors and especially the United States.

While this is obviously a conspiracy theory that seeks to deflect blame from the regimes, several points are important to note here. First, while this narrative serves the regimes' purposes, those regimes themselves fully believe in its truthfulness. Second, while propaganda efforts by regimes have certainly helped spread this narrative, the fact that it has taken hold is not merely the work of propaganda but rather because it has tapped into the preexisting beliefs of the majority of the region's populations. Thirdly, competitors of the United States, both on the regional and international levels such as Iran and Russia have significantly contributed to the emergence of this narrative and its strengthening through their Arabic language propaganda outlets.

As a result of this narrative, the relatively democratic opening that the region witnessed in the decade prior to the Arab Spring is viewed as contributing to the revolutions by opening up society to sinister foreign influences through the media and civil society organizations. To cite one relevant example, just as we speak today, and during the most watched month of Arabic TV, Ramadan, an Egyptian regime-controlled channel is airing a TV series called Counter Attack. The series is presented as based on the Egyptian intelligence files and shows the United States as not only the creator of Jihadi groups, but as conspiring against Egypt through its agents in Egyptian civil society.

Weakness of liberal democratic actors

Despite hopes that the Arab Spring would lead to the emergence of liberal and democratic actors in the region and finally put an end to the Faustian choice between authoritarian regimes and totalitarian Islamist movements,

the events of the past decade have only exposed the inherent weakness of liberal democratic actors across the region, as well as the flimsiness of their commitment to those values.

In Egypt, frightened by the Muslim Brotherhood, many of those perceived as offering the alternative to the status quo ran to the bosom of the state and became cheerleaders for the military coup. A similar outcome in Tunisia was only avoided by the inherent weakness of the Tunisian military and Al Nahda's willingness to compromise following developments in Egypt. In other countries the sectarian divides proved too deep for those who had been previous champions of reform.

A Fight for Survival

While the United States has viewed the Arab Spring uprisings as a struggle for democracy and human rights, large segments of the region's populations have viewed them a struggle for survival. The rise of Islamist movements following the Arab Spring whether to power or to take command of the anti-regime uprisings, has led many segments of the populations of those countries to choose the existing regimes, despite their oppression, as the lesser of two evils.

For millions across the region, the threat that Islamists posed to the nation-state framework, minority rights, and women's rights, has meant that elections were not simply viewed as a repetitive process every few years to choose the country's leaders, but instead as a one-time event that would ensure Islamists' dominance and the demise of their competitors.

This has been especially true in countries with large religious and ethnic minorities such as Syria, but also took place in countries with a more homogenous population such as Egypt. Throughout the Middle East, the erosion of bonds of trust across the political spectrum has made the prospect of democratic transitions impossible.

A Human Rights Foreign Policy in the Middle East

Despite this legacy of the Arab Spring, and the obstacle it poses to an attempt by the United States to promote greater freedoms and human rights in the Middle East, there is still room for the United States to act. But instead of an overall attempt to transform the region, an outcome that has

no possibility of success, the United States should instead focus on some key areas where meaningful change is possible and where the United States has the ability to change facts on the ground.

The first area is freedom of the press and access to information - both of which are denied to most peoples of the region. The United States should pay special attention to the few courageous voices and independent media outlets that still exist in the region offering an alternative voice to the governments' line. More importantly, the Biden administration should utilize the available tools in its own arsenal to remedy the lack of access to information and accurate news, as well as counter conspiracy theories and anti-American rhetoric by those regimes, especially those allied to the United States.

The second area is that of the weakness of democratic liberal actors in the region. While U.S. support for specific parties or politicians would not be helpful as it would only reinforce conspiracy theories about the U.S. agenda in the region and tarnish those supported, an overall commitment to support democratic and liberal ideas, especially through the educational systems would help remedy this weakness on the long run.

The third area is that of religious freedom. Religious minorities across the region are under assault by both regimes and Islamist groups. Helping build safeguards for religious minorities does not only help their prospects of survival but can genuinely ease the societal tensions in those countries, by fostering toleration and bonds of trust amongst the region's populations.

Thank you again for holding this hearing and I look forward to your questions.