

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

US Congress

**Human Rights and US Policy in the MENA Region Ten Years After the Arab Spring**

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Thank you to the committee chairs for gathering us here to talk about the state of the Middle East and North Africa today for the people living there.

Many of us remember the Arab Spring as a time of hope as people stood in the streets against corruption, oppression, closing societies, and cruel governance. Ten years later, the underlying human rights conditions that led to widespread revolt have only deepened.

My testimony today will focus on human rights in MENA now and how the United States government can and should respond. Human Rights Watch is a global organization that helps protect rights in more than 90 countries by gathering facts and providing policymakers like the chairs of this Commission with ground truth.

Today, the ground truth in the Middle East and North Africa is bleak.

Conflicts across the region have resulted in 12 million [people](#) being internally displaced, and millions of others becoming refugees, fueling a tide of repression and xenophobic populism in Europe. Several economic crises have led to increasing unemployment, food insecurity, and greater instability in parts of the MENA region, further exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic and low oil prices.

Autocrats not only remain in power but have entrenched themselves further with brutal tactics against the political opposition. Take as just one example Saudi Arabia under the rule of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman brought has embarked on a [campaign of repression](#) including against many dissidents, notably prominent women's rights activists who had campaigned for the right to drive and end discrimination. Indeed, women who work to change laws and practices that limit their agency face harassment, intimidation, and arrest in most [countries in the region](#). The same is true for members of ethnic and religious minorities as well as the LGBT community across MENA.

But the apparent failure of the Arab Spring to bring an era of respect for human rights hasn't stopped people throughout the region from agitating for their rights. A popular movement in

Algeria in 2019 led to the country's leader stepping down. Similar movements in Iraq and Lebanon have been called a second Arab Spring.

Still, human rights movements struggle to gain steam not only because of coronavirus restrictions but because of repressive national laws and the brutal tactics of security forces across the region. In Bahrain, since 2017 the government has banned all independent media from operating in the country and dissolved all opposition groups. Bahraini dissidents are serving lengthy prison terms for their roles in pro-democracy demonstrations. Egypt's security agencies and parliament have virtually obliterated any room for peaceful assembly, association, or expression. Children, women, and LGBT people are among those detained and who experience abuse at the hands of security officials. Meanwhile, Egypt has engaged in an abusive military campaign in North Sinai, including mass arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, torture, extrajudicial killings, and the demolitions of residential homes, and evictions of Sinai civilians. In Iran, human rights activism faces large-scale repression, with intelligence and judicial authorities often [prosecuting activists for alleged foreign contacts](#).

Lebanese security forces, even more defensive after the August 2020 blast that killed 200 people, injured more than 6,000, and left 300,000 without shelter, have used excessive—and at times [lethal](#)—force against demonstrators. Morocco and Jordan— which enjoy a relatively positive reputation in US foreign policy circles – have cracked down hard on critics, imprisoning peaceful protest leaders as well as critical social media commentators, artists, and journalists. Morocco courts levy sentences as long as 20 years for peaceful activism. Syria's President Bashar al-Assad's government is brutally suppressing every sign of re-emerging dissent, including through arbitrary arrests and torture, among a population already suffering severe deprivations.

What should the US do?

Put simply, the US government should reassess the policy missteps that exacerbated human rights abuses in the MENA region and not repeat them. The Trump administration further emboldened autocrats like Egyptian President al-Sisi and Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, and tried to protect them from [congressional](#) scrutiny. But US missteps are not limited to the Trump era; the United States under previous administrations sold and transferred billions in arms to governments that repressed peaceful dissent and civil society. Such US support contributed to the world's largest humanitarian [crisis](#) in Yemen and weapons falling into the hands of abusive forces in Libya and elsewhere, and to the use of US weapons in committing violations of the laws of war.

Human Rights Watch urges the Biden administration and the new Congress to stand with the people of the Middle East and North Africa in their desire for human rights in four ways:

- **First, adopt a consistent regional human rights approach.** More consistent US public messaging and criticism of human rights abuses in the region—whether the perpetrator is Iran, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, or Saudi Arabia—will be fundamental in addressing a credibility gap created over decades. Likewise, the consistent implementation, where appropriate, of human rights-related policy tools, including the

Leahy Laws and Global Magnitsky sanctions, with allies and adversaries alike, will ensure that these policy decisions are seen as representing US values rather than as political maneuvers.

- **Second, place a moratorium on arms sales and transfers to the worst rights-abusing governments.** Despite rhetoric about human rights as a central pillar of US foreign policy, the State Department notified Congress of a major arms sale to Egypt the same week that Egyptian authorities detained the family of an Egyptian-American human rights activist and his family. If the Biden administration will not place a moratorium on arms sales like these, we urge Congress to do so until robust [safeguards](#) are put in place. The United States should also restrict export licenses of surveillance technologies to abusive states that spy on and arbitrarily arrest peaceful government critics and dissidents.
- **Third, use peace deals and political agreements to strengthen, not undermine, rights obligations.** The Biden administration is seeking to re-engage on the JCPOA nuclear deal with Iran and will likely seek other agreements in the region. Negotiations should strengthen human rights protections and accountability for rights abuses, and not be used as a justification to neglect or deprioritize human rights issues in these countries.
- **Fourth, support civil society groups to document and push back against human rights abuses.** Human rights defenders across MENA are working in extremely challenging environments, often at great risk to themselves and their families. US support would be powerful for activists in their uphill and risk-filled efforts to curb these abusive practices. The US can start by calling out government officials and others who threaten, prosecute/persecute??, or harm human rights defenders and other peaceful activists across the region. US senior officials should publicly call for the release of human rights defenders unjustly imprisoned for their human rights advocacy. The United States should also move from focusing its biggest support for civil society in adversarial countries like Iran to supporting civil society groups more broadly including through regional initiatives that connect efforts across borders.

Thank you again for allowing me to testify today and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.