



Statement from Human Rights First

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing Human Rights and U.S. Policy in the MENA Region

Ten Years After the Arab Spring April 29, 2021

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Chairman McGovern and Chairman Smith

On behalf of Human Rights First I would like to thank the Lantos Commission for holding these important and timely hearings, and for working with us so closely over the last decade on these issues.

On many research trips to the region I have heard from human rights defenders from Abu Dhabi to Cairo to Manama how much they value the attention of this commission to their struggle for rights. While I will try to reflect what I have heard from them in terms of recommendations for U.S. foreign policy, I also encourage the commission to continue to invite human rights defenders to brief its members directly, and to listen to their suggestions for a change in approach from Washington.

While Human Rights First has not focused on every country in the region, our experience suggests a fundamental change in U.S. policy is necessary to help establish human rights as a core principle in many parts of the region.

Key failures of the Obama and Trump administrations have fueled a decline in the environment for human rights over the last ten years in U.S. military partners Bahrain, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates.

The United States has contributed to instability and misery across the region for many years. The U.S. government should now - at a minimum - adopt a Do No Harm policy in all of its policies in the Middle East.

Human Rights First offers the following seven recommendations to the U.S. government to avoid repeating mistakes of the last decade, to end its complicity in violent repression, and to encourage a healthier environment for rights.

1. End unconditional military support and stop enabling terrorism.

Since 2009, successive U.S. administrations have negotiated over \$120 billion in arms sales to Saudi Arabia, and between 2010-2017 over \$10.6 billion to the United Arab Emirates. Apart from torturing and jailing peaceful human rights defenders in their own countries, these dictatorships have led a disastrous war in Yemen, which has included the widespread bombing of civilians. The Saudi regime also murdered dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Turkey in 2018.

Since 2011 (and for the 30 years that preceded it), the U.S. government has given about \$1.3 billion in military aid every year to Egypt. The money has continued to flow to the dictatorship of President Sisi, which is even more repressive than President Mubarak's. This despite mass human rights violations, including the massacre of more than 1,000 protestors in Cairo on August 14, 2013.

Washington has also continued its military and political support to the Egyptian government despite Egyptian prisons becoming major recruiting centers for ISIS and other violent extremists. The routine torture and abuse in Egypt's places of detention, as documented by Human Rights First in 2019, drive fresh recruits into the arms of terrorist organizations in the country's jails. The U.S. government should not be shoring up a regime that tortures prisoners.

The justifiable impression that both Mideast governments and human rights defenders have is that political and military support from Washington is largely guaranteed to U.S. partners no matter how abysmal their human rights records. That perception can only change by replacing the unconditional security relationships.

Whether or not Congress imposes human-rights conditions on specific U.S. military assistance, the United States must make clear that it will simply not check its values at the door and allow assistance to flow no matter the circumstances. And when Congress does impose such conditions, the executive branch should not blithely waive them away or purport to find improvements in situations where abusive practices have in fact continued.

2. Don't flip-flop.

The Obama administration's flip-flopping messages on Egypt and Bahrain in early 2011 left both activists and governments uncertain about where the U.S. government stood.

The administration's policy towards popular protests against the dictatorships sometimes appeared to change daily. During the Egyptian revolution of January and February 2011, as President Obama was calling it "an inspiration to people around the world" and urging Mubarak to go, the envoy he sent to Cairo, Frank Wisner, was publicly [saying](#) Mubarak should stay in power, and that his "continued leadership" was "critical." The U.S. government should be consistent in its messaging on its support for peaceful protest, and in its calls for political reform.

3. Push for inclusion.

It is in U.S. interests to promote stability through political inclusion. Washington can use its strong relationship with Bahrain's military to press for radical reform, so that the police and military are not drawn almost exclusively from the country's minority Sunni population. The U.S. government should refuse to train groups of Bahraini military and police forces unless they include a proportion of Shia representation.

4. Don't hold double standards.

Robert Ford, U.S. Ambassador to Syria, visited demonstrators on the streets of Damascus in the early days of the 2011 protests. His counterparts were nowhere to be seen in Cairo or Manama, despite similar protests. During the Trump administration, the U.S. embassy in Egypt routinely and enthusiastically tweeted about the rights of people in Iran, but remains silent about the rights of those outside its windows.

5. Don't hide behind closed-door diplomacy.

For ten years, U.S. government officials have assured local activists they are raising human rights concerns privately with their dictator partners. That policy has largely failed. But when U.S. officials have publicly named prisoners who should be released—from the medics in Bahrain in 2011 to human rights defenders from the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights in 2021 — there have been better results.

6. "See Something, Say Something" on unfair trials

Major judicial reform is clearly needed in many countries in the region. While the U.S. should encourage its military partners to establish genuinely independent judiciaries, free from political control, such developments won't happen overnight. A contribution that U.S. government officials can make immediately is on trial observations. While U.S. government officials are often present at politically sensitive trials in many countries in the region, they refrain from publicly commenting on the court proceedings, even when the trial is clearly a sham. Such silence is sometimes interpreted as acquiescence, even endorsement, of the unfair trial.

U.S. officials should adopt a policy of See Something, Say Something on trial observations, and publicly and immediately state if a trial they have witnessed falls short of international legal standards.

7. Back up words with action.

To date, the United States has rarely used tools like the Global Magnitsky sanctions program to address serious human rights abuses and corruption in the Middle East, and has never used it despite credible reports of sanctionable abuses in Egypt and Bahrain. Especially where there is a pattern of widespread or systemic abuses, the U.S. government should respond more forcefully through targeted sanctions against the perpetrators.

Such sanctions would not end the bilateral relationship, as U.S. sanctions against Saudi officials responsible for killing Jamal Khashoggi have shown, but they would make clear that the U.S. government will speak out and impose some consequence when abuses occur.