



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**

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

**Thursday, April 28, 2021**

**11:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.**

**Virtual vis Cisco WebEx**

#### **As prepared for delivery**

Good morning and thank you for joining us today for this Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on the Middle East and North Africa ten years after the Arab Spring.

I extend a special welcome to the witnesses and thank them for their commitment to human rights and for sharing their expertise with us today.

It's been ten years since a wave of popular pro-democracy, pro-human rights movements in mostly Muslim countries of the Middle East and North Africa inspired hope in the region and the world.

In short order we witnessed the resignation of an authoritarian president in Tunisia, important constitutional reforms in Morocco and the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. Change seemed on the horizon in Bahrain and in Syria.

But ten years later, many of the initial successes have been rolled back. Most of the popular movements have been brutally repressed by authoritarian rulers who, instead of being replaced by democratic leaders, have consolidated their grip on power. Syria, Yemen and Libya have been ravaged by armed conflicts with devastating humanitarian consequences for the region and the world.

As we will hear today, authoritarian governments across the region have used similar methods to suppress dissent, many of which are simply and unequivocally human rights violations.

These methods have included criminalization of speech and association, prolonged arbitrary detention, torture, stripping of nationality, reprisals against family members, and intrusive regulation of non-governmental organizations. Often the governments justify these measures by claiming they are combatting terrorism.

Even when the U.S. has imposed sanctions on some of the individuals believed to be responsible for some of the gravest abuses, we have not seen the governments improve their behavior in significant ways. Under President Trump, the U.S. mostly looked the other way.

That serious human rights violations are occurring in so many countries in a single region would be a concern to this Commission under any circumstances. And in fact we have held a number of briefings and hearings on the human rights situations in Bahrain, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Yemen in recent years.

But our general concern is magnified because several of the countries with the worst human rights records are long-standing allies of the United States.

These are countries that host U.S. military bases and to which the U.S. government regularly provides billions of dollars of security assistance and sells billions of dollars' worth of arms.

These are countries we describe as partners in the "war against terrorism." Yet their own domestic policies appear to reproduce the conditions of disempowerment, exclusion and hopelessness that feed radicalization.

When states criminalize dissent, imprison writers and intellectuals, prevent the opposition from organizing and competing, and limit freedom of the press, these are sure signs that those who hold power are afraid they might lose it.

When anyone who thinks differently is at risk of being labeled a terrorist, that is not a sign of stability.

When these kinds of measures overlap with discrimination based on religious or ethnic differences, states risk hardening social divisions and laying the groundwork for atrocities.

Why does the U.S. tolerate these consistent patterns of human rights abuses by our supposed allies?

Historically, energy dependence had a lot to do with it. More recently, the excuse is that Iran is the bigger boogeyman and we must make common cause to contain that authoritarian regime.

Personally, I don't like being in a position where I am expected to choose between bad authoritarian regimes.

When I look at the Middle East, I also see the many brave young people who have risked their lives to imagine a different world for themselves. People like Raif Badawi and his sister Samar, who are wasting away in prison because of the intolerance and fear of the ruling family in Saudi Arabia.

I see the women who took leadership roles in the Arab Spring, the women who fought for the right to drive in Saudi Arabia — in the twenty-first century, mind you —, and ended up in jail for their efforts.

I believe these are the people U.S. foreign policy should be empowering in the Middle East.

Many of my colleagues in Congress share this view and that is reflected in recent initiatives to end the war in Yemen, condition or cut off arms sales to Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and to require the Department of Defense to identify alternatives to basing the U.S. 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet in Bahrain, to name a few.

The bottom line is that we do not want the U.S. to be complicit in any way, shape or form with human rights violations committed by “allied” governments. We have seen enough.

We need a new human rights-based U.S. foreign policy toward the MENA region. We are here today to receive recommendations on how to fundamentally rethink the U.S. relationship with the countries of this region.

I want to close by reading into the record the names of all the prisoners of conscience from the Middle East who are currently included in the Human Rights Commission's Defending Freedoms Project. I renew the call that each of them be released immediately and unconditionally:

From Bahrain:

- Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, human rights defender
- Abduljalil Al-Singace, engineer and blogger
- Ahmed Humaidan, photographer
- Sheikh Ali Salman, leader of banned political association
- Naji Fateel, blogger, tweeter and youth leader

From Egypt: Mahmoud Abu Zeid (Shawkan), photographer, “released” but has to spend every night in prison

From Iran:

- Youcef Nadarkhani, converted to Christianity
- Ardeshir Fanaian, Baha'i

From Kuwait: Hamad al-Naqi, Shia Muslim who criticized Prophet Muhammed

From Saudi Arabia:

- Raif Badawi, blogger
- Waleed Abu al-Khair, human rights lawyer
- Samar Badawi, human rights activist who challenged the male guardianship program

From Syria: Khalil Maatouk, head of the Syrian Center for the Defense of Detainees

From the United Arab Emirates: Ahmed Mansoor, human rights defender

This list does not begin to exhaust those who have been unjustly imprisoned. I regret to say that there are thousands more.

Just this week we received requests for help with more cases:

- Jailed Bahrain opposition leader Hasan Mushaima, 72 years old, serving a life sentence for his part in the Pearl Uprising in 2011, and in poor health;
- Ola al Qaradawi and Hosam Khalaf, who have been arbitrarily detained in Egypt for 4 years without a trial; and
- The mother of Abdelrahman Elshwekh, a civilian convicted and imprisoned by a military court, who was so severely tortured in Egypt's Minya prison that he had to be hospitalized. After she spoke to the media about her son, her home was raided. She, her husband and her 18-year-old daughter were later arrested, and she was charged with belonging to a terrorist organization.

Again, enough is enough.

Let me turn now to Co-Chair Smith.