



**Submitted to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**For a Hearing on “Human Rights and U.S. Policy in the MENA Region Ten Years  
After the Arab Spring”**

**April 29, 2021 - 11:00 a.m.**

**Testimony of Philippe Nassif  
Advocacy Director for the Middle East and North Africa  
Amnesty International USA**

Chairman McGovern, Chairman Smith and members of the Commission. On behalf of Amnesty International USA, I thank the Commission for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Over the past 10 years, since the mass uprisings of 2011 that became known as the ‘Arab Spring’, activists and human rights defenders across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have continued to demand their rights in the face of relentless repression and vicious crackdowns. Governments across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) displayed a chilling determination to crush protests with ruthless force and trample over the rights of hundreds of thousands of demonstrators who took to the streets to call for social justice and political reforms.

Instead of addressing the root causes that drove people to take to the streets, authorities in Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen have crushed protests and attempted to silence dissent, using extreme violence, mass arrests and arbitrary detention to intimidate critics.

Ten years on the human rights situation across much of the Middle East and North Africa paints a bleak picture; Syria and Yemen are suffering the devastating human costs of armed conflict, Libya is a shattered state after a decade of tumult, the governments of Egypt and Bahrain have intensified their crackdowns on freedom of expression and human rights defenders.

Yet despite all of this, there are clear signs that brave young people have not given up on demanding their rights. For example, [in the fall of 2019](#), a new wave of mass protests swept the region. [Algerians](#), Lebanese, Libyans, and Iraqis took to the streets demanding their governments step down due to corruption and negligence. [Egyptians](#), living for years under the dark authoritarian clouds cast by President Sisi, took to the streets. [Iran](#) also saw tens of thousands of its own protest, at great risk for their safety.

Diplomats and policy makers around the world started asking themselves “will this unrest ever end?”. The quick answer is no. Because when [over 600](#) young Iraqi men and women are killed by live ammunition, or when [Lebanese protesters](#) - Muslim and Christian, Shia, Sunni, and Druze - continue to protest in the face of government crackdown even when the world’s largest non-nuclear explosion devastates swaths of their beloved capital city Beirut, the people continued to pour out into the streets fearful of nothing, and hopeful for everything. A region more known for resignation and acceptance has now found its voice, which is one of collective action and people power, whatever the risk.



The momentum that was building with the second wave of protests in 2019 came to a grinding halt, not from the clouds of tear gas and hail of bullets, but from [COVID-19](#). Mass demonstrations were replaced by lockdowns and hospital wards treating protesters were instead filled with feverish people struggling to breathe. This in turn has sparked even more unrest. Health systems, devastated in

Syria, Libya, and Yemen buckled under the triumvirate rule of corruption, war, and a pandemic. The disease has seeped from deep into Assad's notorious dungeons, to the halls of power in Tehran and Riyadh.

The mass uprisings of 2011 and then again in 2019 sent shockwaves across MENA. The demonstrations broke the taboo surrounding popular protests and triggered an irreversible shift in the political imagination of young women and men. People in the region recognized the true power of peaceful protest and learned to dream of a different future for themselves, one where they seize control of their rights.

Here is what the US Congress can do to support human rights and help stabilize the region:

## **Libya:**

- Pass the bipartisan Libya Stabilization Act in the House and Senate to ensure there is accountability for human rights violations that occurred during the conflict, and help support the newly formed Libyan government with humanitarian assistance to combat COVID-19 and fallout from a decade of war.
- Engage with the Government of National Unity to ensure that all militia and armed group commanders reasonably suspected of committing human rights violations are suspended from their positions, pending the outcome of criminal investigations, and all efforts at integrating members of militias and armed groups into state institutions are accompanied by vetting procedures for their involvement in human rights violations.
- Enforce the UN Security Council's comprehensive arms embargo on arms supplies to and from Libya, which was unanimously adopted in 2011.
- Cooperate to investigate and, where appropriate, prosecute individuals suspected of war crimes or other crimes under international law committed in Libya, including by exercising universal jurisdiction.

## **Egypt:**

- The US Government should ban all arms sales to Egypt along with the transfer of tear gas, small arms, ammunition, and other repressive equipment and condition security aid to the country broadly due to egregious human rights violations committed by the Sisi government. There are further concerns of Egyptian arms transfers to the LAAF armed group in Libya (in breach of the embargo) where there is a substantial risk that they would be used to commit or facilitate IHL violations
- Publicly call on the Egyptian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release all those arbitrarily detained for peacefully exercising their rights, close criminal investigations in case 173 (foreign funding case) and remove travel bans and asset freezes against HRDs, stop prosecutions of



survivors and witnesses of SGBV, ensure independent monitoring of places of detention and establish a moratorium on executions

- Support efforts by victims to pursue justice internationally including in US courts, including by instructing the DoS not to bestow immunity on former Egyptian government officials including in the case of Mohamed Soltan against former Egyptian PM Hazem al-Biblawi. **Crisis in Yemen:**

- Congress should block the multi billion-dollar arms sale to the UAE due to their conduct in Yemen and Libya, and their practice of handing off weaponry to militias who have gone on to commit human rights abuses, as documented in Amnesty's groundbreaking report "[when arms go astray](#)".

**Lebanon:**

- The US Government should approach Lebanon's current humanitarian crisis, caused by a collapsed economy, the Beirut port blast, and COVID-19 as it treats a country following a natural disaster. Immediate humanitarian assistance in the form of food, water, medicine, and electricity is needed to be delivered directly to the Lebanese people.

- The US, partnering with the UN should organize an international summit to prevent Lebanon's total collapse and assist in the formation of a government that is respectful of human rights and responsive to its citizenry, with accountability front and center.

**Syria:**

- The US Congress should pressure the executive branch to work with existing efforts led by the UN and European countries and the ICC to hold those in the Syrian government accountable for crimes against humanity.