



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

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

Thursday, April 19, 2021
11:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.
Virtual via Cisco WebEx

Rep. Christopher H. Smith

Excerpt of Remarks

Today's hearing topic is one that is important, but also one that is fraught with pitfalls and requires a bit of humility about the limits of America's ability to impact outcomes: namely, we must keep in mind that the human rights situation in the Middle East and North Africa is bad, but it can always get worse.

The promise of an Arab Spring, unfortunately, was one which soon gave rise, in the phrasing of one astute commentator, to an [Arab Fall](#). Why that happened ultimately is, I think, because people in countries such as Egypt determined that as bad as authoritarian rule was and is, when the alternative is

governance in the name of political Islam – be it the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the charnel house which became Raqqa in Syria under ISIS, or the short-circuited, prototypical rise of the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria in the early 1990s – the supposed cure can be worse than the disease.

This then is the dilemma which we face today – we must do what we can to fight for human rights, including civil and political rights which can help give rise to authentic democracy – within oppressive political systems, while having a realist’s understanding that a blundering commitment to QUOTE UNQUOTE “principles” in the abstract can make matters on the ground worse. Further, that populist revulsion at oppression, corruption and incompetent governance can lead to a post-election hangover where an incoming regime imposes Islamism, or political Islam, which replaces authoritarianism with a totalitarianism that creates even more of a human rights challenge.

In other words, our actions should be guided by a variation of the physicians’ Hippocratic Oath: first, do no harm.

It seems to me that part of the problem – and here I would really like to engage our panelists and the organizations they represent – is outside advocacy on behalf of some favored causes, while ignoring others, and double standards

which focus on some countries engaged in the MENA region while ignoring others whose conduct is equally egregious.

Thus some call out abuses in Saudi Arabia, as one should, yet ignore those perpetrated by Iran or Turkey, and the destabilizing role both those countries play in the region. More to the point, there is often an amplification of the flaws of Israel, the only true democracy in the region and one which has an exemplary commitment to the rule of law, while ignoring or downplaying far more egregious human rights abuses in Gaza or the West Bank.

There also should be greater advocacy on behalf of religious freedom and the rights of religious minorities throughout the region. The extinguishing of communities in the Middle East whose roots go back millennia and which have lived alongside the majority for centuries, often in the oppressed status of *dhimmitude*, should be the first and foremost concern of every human rights organization. The very existence of religious minorities helps create fertile ground for the growth of pluralism, mutual understanding and tolerance in general; their suppression is a harbinger of greater suppression of the rights of all.

I also ask our panelists to examine critically the nature of the cases they highlight in their advocacy, and the resources they devote to such advocacy. I would like to introduce a statement into the record by Hussein Aboubakr

Mansour, a participant in Egypt's Arab Spring who had been arrested and tortured during the time of President Mubarak. In it Mr. Mansour writes poignantly about his own experience, but also raises the case of [Kinda al-Khatib](#), a 23-year-old Lebanese woman and a social media activist whose tweets criticized Hezbollah and urged peace with Israel. She received a 3-year sentence by a Lebanese Armed Forces court after she was indicted on the charge of collaborating online with Israelis and being an enthusiast for peace. In prison she contracted COVID-19 and lost weight to a life-threatening level.

Instead of championing the causes of incarcerated non-violent peace-builders such as Kinda al-Khatib, however, we see advocacy on behalf of Islamists such as Saudi cleric Salman al-Odeh, jailed since 2017. For those unfamiliar with al-Odeh, in 2004 he [called for jihad](#) against US-led coalition forces in Iraq. And in [August 2012](#), Mr. al-Odah said in an interview, that the Holocaust "has been turned into a myth of tremendous proportions." He then elaborated that, "Through this Holocaust, the Jews began to extort many governments worldwide – in Europe and in the US," and that "The role of the Jews is to wreak destruction, to wage war, and to practice deception and extortion." And, then, to top it off, he engaged in blood libel, accusing the Jews of using blood to bake Passover matzos.

So my question is why is the case of al-Odeh prioritized over that of al-Khatib, and why are institutional resources devoted to advocating for his release and not hers?

To conclude, the human rights problems of the Middle East and North Africa are complex and confounding. I look forward to all of your testimonies as you tackle them.