

Introduction

The Multifaceted Human Rights Crisis in the Arab World

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This report paints a bleak picture of the status of human rights in the Arab world, but the truth is that the situation is darker, more tragic, and more painful than any report could convey. Neither the Tunisian exception nor the hope that reform setbacks in Morocco will be reversed does little to dispel the darkness.

State rulers in the region claim they are compelled to restrict rights and liberties to prioritize fighting terror, seen as the greatest threat to the prosperity of peoples in the region and around the world. The fact is that fighting terrorism is not a priority for the governments that tout their counterterrorism efforts day and night in order to buy the international community's silence on the war crimes, crimes against humanity, and human rights crimes they commit every day against their citizens or other peoples in the region.

Holding back the Iranian expansion in the region, especially in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen, confronting Shi'ism, and burying the Arab Spring—these are the priorities of Saudi Arabia and some Gulf states, not al-Qaeda or the Islamic State (IS). Syria's priority is to uproot the 'moderate' opposition, not the extremists or IS, while the priority for Iraq is to secure Shia control of power and wealth at the expense of Sunnis and Kurds. The Egyptian government's priority is to preclude the possibility of a renewed, more liberal Arab Spring, not to fight IS, which is now in almost complete control of northern Sinai.

All the region's rulers are betting that Western states will step in at the right moment to deny terrorism a decisive victory, but they do not expect similar Western intervention on the side of their strategic foes—namely, those forces striving to establish modern democracies when the time is right. The continued threat of IS is crucial for the false legitimacy of the governments of some Arab states. It alleviates popular and international pressure on these governments for political and economic reform and respect for human rights obligations. Israel is no exception to this regional consensus, but as usual, it is the most explicit and open about its true objectives. Several prominent Israeli officials have stated that the disappearance of IS would be the greatest threat to Israeli national security in the foreseeable future.

One of the factors that most contributed to the deterioration of human rights in the region this year was the outsized influence of Sunni-Shia tension, the Saudi-Iranian conflict, and oil money. Over several decades petrodollars have contributed to the rise of religious extremism and terrorist groups in the region and, in turn, the deterioration of human rights regionally and globally. But the impact of oil money became especially severe after the first waves of the Arab Spring in January 2011. After this, such support was no longer limited to rich businessmen and individuals in the royal families of Gulf emirates. It extended to decision-making circles in Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE, Qatar, and perhaps elsewhere. While governments of these states disagree on several major regional issues, they all viewed and engaged with the Arab Spring as a threat to their vital interests and perhaps long-term survival. Despite the substantial decline in oil prices and resources, the negative impact of oil money was particularly marked this year given that it was a matter of central political decision making of these governments. This had the worst

ramifications in Yemen, Syria, Egypt, and Libya, where unconditional support was given to counterrevolutionary forces, to the commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity with impunity, to undermining modest international plans for humanitarian aid and counterterrorism, and to rescuing what remained of some states.

The impact of oil money and its consequences for human rights in the Arab world would not have been so destructive were it not for the simultaneous decline of international political will to support human rights issues, which also coincided with a democratic retreat in some Eastern European states and the rise of the far right in several Western European nations.

This context allows us to understand how Saudi Arabia could channel a UN Human Rights Council resolution on Yemen to its own interests during a meeting of the HRC in September 2015, and in 2016 force the UN secretary-general to remove its name from a list of the worst violators of children's rights after its release. Systematic, subversive action is being undertaken to weaken international human rights standards and mechanisms in UN agencies and other international forums by a set of states most hostile to human rights values and principles, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Algeria. In fact, oil wealth now threatens the effectiveness of some of the most important international decision making institutions in human rights and poses a challenge to all UN member states.

The silence of some UN member states on similar types of extortion by some states on other occasions has only served to normalize these unethical practices in the UN, thus eroding the effectiveness and credibility of the institution. The marked decline in political and moral support shown by major democratic states to the UN, its Secretary General and High Commissioner on Human Rights in the face of the systematic subversive activities of the anti-human rights club of nations threatens to undermine the role of the international institution in protecting human rights, and this in one of the most imperiled regions of the world, the Arab region.

This retreat did not begin with the international community's growing disinclination to hold President Bashar al-Assad accountable for his use of chemical and other internationally prohibited weapons against unarmed civilians. This retreat is not about an isolated step

taken in a vacuum, but is much broader, and its repercussions are not and will not be limited to a single region, as evidenced by the influx of Syrian refugees to Europe, the hundreds of thousands of migrants crossing the Mediterranean, and the spread of lethal IS attacks to Europe, the US, East Asia, and Turkey.

The human rights cause lies at the heart of the conflict between the Arab world's forces of modernity and backwardness. And despite that available indicators point that this conflict didn't end with the relapse of the Arab Spring, a costly and bloody price will be paid unless reform takes place.

In this context, the mission of independent human rights organizations in the Arab world assumes greater import. On one side, they face Arab governments whose human rights crimes have exceeded conventional bounds, while on the other side they encounter the steady erosion of international human rights standards, waning enthusiasm for international instruments for the protection of human rights, and declining global solidarity on human rights issues, especially for a region seen as the source of terrorism and refugees and migrants with alien religious cultures and customs which are unwelcome by growing populations in the host states. This in turn feeds far-right, anti-globalization isolationist groups in Europe and the US, bolsters their political influence, and stokes religious hatred and racism against Arabs and Muslims.

Nevertheless, some Arab governments view this rightward trend favorably. They believe that if such groups reach power in Europe and the US, it will make Arab peoples more attentive to the external threat and see their rulers as saviors not as corrupt tyrants, leading them to abandon their aspirations for freedom and economic prosperity. By the same token, figures with the far right in the West admire "strong" Arab leaders able to repress their people and keep them firmly within national borders, since, as these rulers themselves claim, Arabs do not understand "Western" human rights concepts. This is another crucial point of intersection between the West's far-right and some of the Arab worlds' ruling elites; that "Arabs" are less worthy of equality and freedom, inside and outside their countries, and classify them as inferior to other peoples and races around the world.

Given the variations in political and social conditions in Arab states and their significance for the priorities of human rights organizations in the Arab world, it is perhaps appropriate to devote special attention in this phase to certain missions. Nationally, it is important to strengthen consultation, understanding, coordination, and joint action with the reform-minded elite across the ideological and religious spectrum, including those close to the ruling elite and with military and security backgrounds if possible. Despite the failure of prominent political Islamist groups in the Arab region in the context of the Arab Spring, the issue of Islam and human rights- from a human rights perspective- remains vital, especially in light of the rise of extremist, violent religious discourse and in light of the contemporary approach recently adopted by the Ennahda movement in Tunisia concerning the relationship between state and religion.

On a regional level, it's more important than ever to boost consultations and coordination between independent human rights organization on such issues among other shared priorities.

Internationally, long-term engagement and coordination is vital between liberal and leftist democratic trends, as well as social movements -particularly those defending the rights of immigrants. In this context, greater attention should be given to a fact-based discourse about the Arab state in question and the region at the expense of mobilizing, solidarity rhetoric. It may be important to search for new allies in emerging industrial democracies in the Global South, particularly in Latin America. In any case, more attention must be devoted to strengthening the role of the UN and its agencies working to protect human rights, to counter the assault on them by an alliance of authoritarian governments from the region and the world, which seeks to undermine human rights standards and international instruments for accountability and the protection of human rights.

The civil wars and armed conflicts underway in some Arab states may end with new states emerging from the ashes. The UN must play a principal role in rebuilding these "new" states and in guaranteeing peaceful coexistence between confessions, ethnicities, and tribes embroiled in years of bloody conflict or ethnic cleansing, whether these new states retain the same borders or not. In this context, the UN mission also includes the independent state of Palestine, if

international efforts are able to meet this demand, which enjoys near international consensus.

It's more important than ever to highlight the collective responsibility of the international community to devise a framework to wholly address the chronic structural crises which have produced unprecedented and severe humanitarian catastrophes, and which have reflected poorly on international peace and security as well as on human rights safeguards around the world.