

ISSUES

- The conditions that gave rise to the Arab Spring protests continue to simmer — chiefly, corruption, political repression, human rights abuses, and economic malfeasance.
- The Middle East, according to Freedom House, remains the least free region in the world. Authoritarian rulers are cracking down on human rights; political imprisonment, torture, forced disappearances, and destruction of online freedoms are increasingly the norm. Some governments have used the pandemic as a cover to impose stronger political restrictions.
- With the erosion of global oil prices, the so-called “authoritarian bargain” — governments’ ability to purchase political acquiescence through generous social and economic benefits — is failing.
- Recent upheavals in Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Iran highlight the persistence of discontent throughout the region and hint at more to come.

US INTERESTS

- Getting ahead of the curve of instability through proactive diplomacy and economic/defense policy.
- Preventing hostile foreign actors, such as Russia and China, from taking advantage by political and economic underwriting of authoritarian models.
- Aiming friends and allies toward political and economic arrangements that emphasize freedom and rule of law in a U.S.-led international order.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Plan for and anticipate drastic political change — both tactically through political messaging, and strategically by urging governments to end rights abuses and open political space.
- Adopt a whole-of-government approach. State, Defense, and intelligence agencies must speak with one voice on civic, political, and human rights, and their direct connection with U.S. policy and domestic political considerations and values.
- Ensure human rights restrictions in existing legislation, such as the Leahy Law, are respected and not systematically waived, thus maintaining leverage.

- Make certain arms sales policies are in line with broader humanitarian and human rights concerns.
- Identify issues where U.S. economic interests and human rights converge, e.g., worker protections, and emphasize those in talks.
- Instruct diplomats to engage with governments' political opponents and human rights activists, thus keeping governments off balance and providing crucial support.
- Speak out publicly on human rights abuses, as governments are vulnerable to public pressure.