

DEMOCRACY & HUMAN RIGHTS

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ISSUES

- The conditions that gave rise to the Arab Spring protests continue to simmer: corruption, repression, human rights abuses, youth unemployment, and economic mismanagement.
- The Middle East, according to Freedom House, remains the least free region in the world, and the situation is worse now than it was 10 years ago. 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 fall in 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, Iran, and elsewhere highlight the persistence of discontent throughout the region and hint at more to come.
- 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.
- Speak out publicly on human rights abuses, as governments in the region are vulnerable to public pressure.
- Engage with political opposition movements and activists; robustly support human rights defenders, especially those facing unjust imprisonment, torture, and lack of due process.
- Conduct zero-based reviews of U.S. political-military relationships in the region, starting with Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and work with Congress to curb out-of-control arms sales to these countries pending human rights improvements.
- Develop a new arms sales policy that recognizes human rights as a priority. Enforce the Leahy Law, which prohibits the State and Defense Departments from providing assistance to foreign military units credibly accused of gross human rights violations.

US INTERESTS

- Getting ahead of the curve of instability through proactive diplomacy and economic/defense policy.
- Preventing hostile foreign actors 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.
- Re-energize multilateral diplomacy to implement a human rights agenda and rational arms sales policies in the region.
- Expand democracy and governance programming for the region, as well as the role and funding of Millennium Challenge Corporation programs to encourage good governance.
- Utilize the Global Magnitsky Act to penalize the region’s most egregious human rights abusers.
- Identify issues where U.S. economic interests and human rights converge and emphasize those in diplomatic engagement.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Anticipate drastic political change in U.S. contingency planning and strategy development.
- Energize U.S. efforts to rebuild its international reputation on human rights, including normalizing its relationship with the International Criminal Court and seizing a leadership role in the United Nations Human Rights Council.