

US Policy Sets Back Arab Human Rights

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The war in Iraq, and America's response to 9/11, have undermined human rights activists throughout the Middle East.

The US administration's decision to turn its back on the United Nations and wage war on Iraq has dealt a severe blow to the Arab world's struggling human rights movement. It is the second blow in less than two years to an emerging human rights movement which already labours under accusations of being a friend of Uncle Sam and a "traitor" to the Arab cause.

Today the decision by so-called democratic states to choose the use of force over international law, and the encouragement this gives authoritarian governments to feel they can take the law into their own hands, risks convincing many of those who defend human rights in the region to stand down.

In a country like Egypt, where the state-controlled media has been blaming Saddam Hussein for bringing a US military presence to the Gulf, the decision to attack Iraq despite opposition from the Security Council has led already prominent human rights defenders to stop challenging, for the time being, the Iraqi regime's bloody human rights record. Opinion pieces criticising the regime for invading Kuwait, gassing thousands of Kurds and leading the country to chaos have vanished from most newspapers and debates.

The first blow to Arab human rights activists came after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, when the US government elected to hold itself above international law and adopted some of the same tactics in its war on terror as police states use to silence opponents.

"Your role collapsed with the collapse of the Twin Towers on September 11," a senior US security official told Amnesty International in December 2001. This blunt reaction came after the London-based human rights group reminded the US government that even perpetrators of despicable acts are entitled to basic rights such as those enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

With the war in Afghanistan, the erosion of safeguards against the arbitrary detention of non-US citizens and the denial of fair treatment to hundreds of detainees flown to the notorious Guantanamo Bay camp had a chilling effect on Arab human rights groups. Many found it troubling that the country which claims to be the leader of the free world would resort to legislative and administrative acts such as the Patriot Act that violate internationally recognised rights. Washington's rising, unquestioned support for Israel's dispossession of the Palestinians, evidenced by its continuous veto of Security Council resolutions aimed at holding Israel accountable for its deeds, only compounded these concerns.

In the wake of 9/11, a number of Arab governments tightened their grip on civil society after US officials expressed admiration for some of their methods. When Secretary of State Colin Powell said "we have much to learn" from Egypt's anti-terrorist methods, which the US once criticised, Egypt extended its 22-year-old state-of-emergency law for three years. Jordan, another US ally, amended its penal code and press law to allow the government to close down any publication for running "false or libellous information that can undermine national unity or the country's reputation."

The outbreak of war against Iraq dealt a second, crippling blow to efforts to raise human rights awareness. In a very short time, the US-led war turned Iraq's dictator, Saddam Hussein, into a less dangerous leader than George W. Bush - even in the opinion of human rights activists, academics and lawyers influenced by Western democratic values.

Today protests are being organised by Arabs from all walks of life: human rights activists and opposition

groups as well as administrations led by notorious rights abusers. The war in Iraq is seen as the most dangerous step ever taken by the US on the road to international lawlessness. The most dangerous, certainly, but not the first: even before the Iraq war, there was criticism of the United States' refusal to abide by international conventions and treaties - among them the Geneva Conventions and the Kyoto treaty on protecting the environment - and to sign up to the International Criminal Court. Arabs generally believe that Washington evokes international law only when it serves its own interests.

Such behaviour undermines efforts currently made by local, regional, and international human rights groups to promote human rights education and the rule of law in the Middle East.

In recent years, human rights awareness has been widening in the region, even among senior officials. Morocco publicly pledged to abide by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to facilitate unprecedented cooperation with Amnesty International. Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat also pledged to abide by the declaration and his government included human rights concepts in school curricula. Human rights education awareness gained so much ground among Arab citizens that many authoritarian rulers started paying lip service to human rights and even talking to international human rights groups.

But this awareness might narrow if Arab governments conclude that, because of the critical focus now on the United States, there is no pressing need to teach human rights in schools or abide by international standards for fair trials. Human rights awareness and the rule of law will never gain substantial ground in the Middle East as long as those who perpetrate war crimes and attack civilians are not brought to international justice. This applies to America every bit as much as to Iraq.

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