



# POMED

PROJECT  
ON MIDDLE EAST  
DEMOCRACY

**House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

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

**April 29, 2021 - 11:00 a.m.**

**Written Testimony of Stephen McInerney  
Executive Director  
Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED)**

---

Good morning. I would like to thank the Lantos Commission and co-chairs Congressman McGovern and Congressman Smith for their crucial work to support human rights abroad. Thank you as well for convening this hearing on human rights and U.S. policy in the Middle East and North Africa, and for giving me this opportunity to address you all.

I would like to begin by speaking frankly about how I see the policies of the United States toward the Middle East and North Africa. I consider them to be a catastrophe, a strategic failure, and a moral stain on our country.

*If* the goals of the United States in this region were to facilitate human rights abuses, including the imprisonment, torture, and murder of innocent civilians; to prevent democratization; and to fuel radicalization, instability, and violence, then I would say that the longstanding American policies in place would be approximately the right ones, and I would say that those policies have been successful towards these unconscionable goals.

Given, however, that the officially stated goals of the United States are precisely the opposite of what I just described, the entirety of U.S. policy should be viewed as a spectacular failure.

But one of the most striking things about U.S. policy toward the Middle East is that no matter what happens, no matter how badly policies fail, the answer here in Washington is *always* to double down on those policies rather than ever changing course. I believe that it is important to

examine closely why that is the case—why Washington clings to policies that are plainly not advancing the stated goals of those policies.

In the 1990s, U.S. policy toward the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region was already dominated by the provision of weapons and other support to repressive authoritarian regimes. Following the horrific attacks of September 11, 2001, the two main U.S. responses in the region were: first, the invasion of Iraq, an enormous strategic error with devastating consequences, and second, a dramatic increase in the delivery of arms to authoritarian regimes.

A decade later, in 2011, the Arab Spring uprisings ousted four dictators from power within 13 months, demonstrating the folly of relying on dictatorships to provide stability, and making clear the overwhelming desire of the region's citizens for the rights and freedoms enjoyed by others around the world. These remarkable events should have been viewed by the United States as a historic opportunity to overhaul its failed policies. But the opposite happened. The main response of the Obama administration was to double down on failing policies by drastically increasing weapons sales to dictatorships. Then the Trump administration doubled down yet again, ramping up these sales to new heights.

The fundamental problem here goes well beyond the vast arms sales. The sharp increases in weapons sales are accompanied by broader support such as political and diplomatic backing, financial assistance, and favorable trade relationships. The U.S. government is the single most important external backer of most of the authoritarian regimes that are repressing the people of the region and fueling radicalization and violence.

The disturbing reality is that the Washington policy community actually seems not to care about stability in the Middle East, despite decades of consistent rhetoric to the contrary, and most policymakers don't care at all about human rights either.

Instead, *the single most important driver of U.S. policy in the Middle East* is the corrupt influence of actors who benefit from the status quo and from existing policies, in particular the repugnant dictatorships who are themselves the number one source of instability in the region.

The most dangerous development regarding U.S. policy toward the MENA region in recent years is the escalation of the corrupt use of funds by some of the world's worst dictators—who should be viewed as mass murderers and terrorists—to buy influence here in Washington, through lobbying, consulting and public relations contracts, weapons purchases, funding for think tanks and universities, and carefully calculated investments in our private sector.

This phenomenon should be viewed as a scourge and as a threat not only to the citizens of the Middle East and North Africa, but also to the interests and national security of the United States.

Essentially, the United States is undermining the security and stability of the MENA region and acting against its own interests because doing so provides financial and political benefits to a growing number of actors who have extensive influence in Washington, including with both of our major political parties.

Moreover, the growing ecosystem that perpetuates the corrupt status quo is built on economic relationships and transactions valued at least in the hundreds of billions of dollars.<sup>1</sup> The actors who benefit from these economic ties have an enormous stake in preserving them and are willing to invest heavily to do so. This community of actors who benefit from the status quo puts considerable resources behind false narratives and myths designed to justify the status quo and to obscure the real motivations. Sadly, such efforts have succeeded in solidifying these myths as the conventional wisdom in Washington.

### **Principal Myths Used to Justify Failed Policies**

Numerous myths and falsehoods have taken root in Washington to justify a policy approach that has been morally reprehensible and a strategic failure. I will discuss here three of the most dominant and corrosive of these myths.

***Myth #1: The dictatorships across the Middle East and North Africa that engage in corrupt business with Washington are essential partners in the fight against terrorism.*** This claim—likely the single most common argument made to justify overwhelming U.S. support for brutal regimes—contradicts much of what is known about the fundamentals of terrorism. In the years immediately following the September 11th attacks, much empirical research examined the root causes of terrorism and the relationships between the likelihood of terrorist attacks and factors such as type of political system and levels of poverty, socioeconomic development, and education. The most conclusive and statistically significant result of a number of these studies was that individuals who engage in terrorism are more likely to be from countries ruled by dictatorships that abuse the human rights of their citizens.<sup>2</sup>

There are entirely logical explanations for what the data showed—essentially, when people are abused and repressed, they are more likely to resort to violence and terrorism. When opportunities for legitimate, nonviolent political engagement are absent, people are more likely to resort to violent acts of terrorism as the only means for addressing real or perceived political grievances.

---

<sup>1</sup> “Arms Sales,” Security Assistance Monitor (accessed May 2021), <https://securityassistance.org/arm-sales/>

<sup>2</sup> Alberto Abadie, “Poverty, Political Freedom, and the Roots of Terrorism,” *American Economic Review* 96, no. 2 (2006). James Piazza, “Rooted in Poverty? Terrorism, Poor Economic Development and Social Change,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, (2006). Alan B. Krueger, *What Makes a Terrorist? Economics and the Roots of Terrorism - Lionel Robbins Lectures* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

The data and the logic point in the same direction. If the United States is sincere about fighting the root causes of terrorism, it must seek to eliminate the authoritarian repression that fuels terrorism, and support the efforts of local citizens to bring about democratic change.

It has been said that the seeds from which Al Qaeda grew were planted in the jails of Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>3</sup> It is not hard to imagine that the seeds of the terrorist organizations of the next generation are being planted today by radicalization among the tens of thousands of political prisoners languishing in awful conditions in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the region's other dictatorships.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, these regimes understand all too well the importance of their perceived value as partners in fighting terrorism to keep weapons and other support flowing from Washington. As such, they actually have a perverse incentive *not* to eliminate terrorism—if they were to defeat non-state terrorist actors decisively, it would undermine the case for tens of billions in support on which they rely to stay in power. Instead, they have an incentive to play the dangerous game of *managing* the threat posed by non-state terrorist entities, aiming to ensure that their own grip on power is not threatened by such groups, while cynically sustaining the “fight” against them indefinitely. Tragically, our own defense industry that profits enormously from tens of billions of dollars of weapons sales to these regimes has the same perverse incentives.

***Myth #2: These dictatorships provide security and stability for the region.*** This is entirely contrary to the available evidence. As mentioned above, numerous academic studies have shown authoritarian repression to be the number one root cause of international terrorism by non-state actors. Other studies have shown that countries ruled by dictatorships are far more likely than those governed democratically to: (1) engage in wars and armed conflicts with other countries; (2) give rise to domestic civil unrest and internal civil wars; and (3) experience state failure or collapse, leaving a vacuum of power leading to unrestrained violence and instability.<sup>5</sup>

It is not a coincidence that the Middle East and North Africa is the only region of the world that lacks stable democratic governments, with the tenuous exception of Tunisia, and that it is also the region most wracked by instability and violence.<sup>6</sup> It is also not a coincidence that as regimes across the MENA region responded to their citizens' peaceful demands for democratic change by

---

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Brian Dooley, “How ISIS Recruits in Egyptian Prisons,” Human Rights First, February 26, 2019, <https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/blog/how-isis-recruits-egyptian-prisons>

<sup>5</sup> Scott D. Bennett, “Toward a Continuous Specification of the Democracy–Autocracy Connection,” *International Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (2006): 313-338, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2006.00404.x>. Håvard Hegre, “Democracy and armed conflict,” *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014): 159-172. Catalina Uribe Burcher and Victoria Perotti, “Opinion: Is democracy good for peace?” *Washington Post*, September 15, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/09/15/is-democracy-good-for-peace/>

<sup>6</sup> “Global Peace Index,” Institute for Economics and Peace, accessed May 6, 2021, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/>

escalating repression, the region grew even more violent and unstable. The reality is that the MENA region will remain violent and unstable as long as it is dominated by dictatorships rather than by accountable, democratic governments. As such, anyone who wants peace or stability should support the citizens of the region who are pressing for peaceful democratic change.

***Myth #3: The dictatorships that engage in corrupt business with Washington are “enlightened” or “moderate” regimes keeping more dangerous forces at bay.*** This type of language dominates discourse about the MENA region in Washington and in the American media landscape, but it has no basis in fact. The authoritarian regimes armed and supported by the United States are neither remotely “moderate” nor “enlightened.” On the contrary, they are among the most extreme, violent, repressive regimes in the world.

According to Freedom House’s most recent global survey of political freedom, Saudi Arabia, the largest purchaser of U.S. weapons, is one of the world’s eight most repressive dictatorships, and it is the only one of those eight regimes ever spoken or written about positively in the United States.<sup>7</sup> Saudi citizens are among the least free people on earth. Its peers in this regard are countries such as North Korea, Somalia, Syria, and Turkmenistan. Along with China and Iran, Saudi Arabia carries out the most executions in the world, including for nonviolent offenses such as participating in peaceful protests. Since Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman became the Kingdom’s de facto ruler in 2017, Saudi Arabia has become even more repressive and politically closed.

With the exception of a brief political opening following its 2011 revolution, Egypt has been ruled by dictators for decades. Sadly, however, the current period under the rule of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi is the most repressive in Egypt’s modern history. El-Sisi has imprisoned tens of thousands of Egyptians for crimes of dissent or activism, and has used extreme measures such as extrajudicial killings, abductions, and enforced disappearances to target those viewed as critics or opponents of his regime.<sup>8</sup> After seizing power in a military coup in July 2013, the following month he ordered the killing of hundreds of Egyptians protesting against the coup and his rule. This massacre was described by Human Rights Watch as “one of the world’s largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in recent history.”<sup>9</sup>

According to the Democracy Index published by the Economist Intelligence Unit, the absolute monarchies of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are less democratic than Vladimir

---

<sup>7</sup> “Saudi Arabia: Freedom in the World 2021 Country Report,” Freedom House, March 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>

<sup>8</sup> “World Report 2021: Egypt,” Human Rights Watch, January 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/egypt>; See also, “Fact Sheet – What Does An Annual \$1.3 Billion in Military Assistance to Egypt Buy American Taxpayers?” POMED, July 2020, <https://pomed.org/fact-sheet-what-does-an-annual-1-3-billion-in-military-assistance-to-egypt-buy-american-taxpayers/>

<sup>9</sup> “All According to Plan: The Rab’a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt,” Human Rights Watch, August 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/12/all-according-plan/raba-massacre-and-mass-killings-protesters-egypt>

Putin’s dictatorship in Russia.<sup>10</sup> Freedom of expression is nonexistent in either Gulf monarchy. Extraordinarily restrictive laws allow the state to impose draconian sentences for any expression deemed critical of the state or its rulers. The UAE is one of the world’s most sophisticated surveillance states, engaging in extensive surveillance inside and outside its borders. It issues harsh sentences for crimes of expression—even expression in private communication. And although Qatari and Emirati citizens—remarkably—enjoy even less political freedom than their Russian counterparts, the situation in these two rich monarchies is even worse for non-citizen foreign migrants, primarily low-wage workers from poor countries, who constitute the overwhelming majority of the population. The *kafala* labor system that governs most residents of these countries is often described as a form of human trafficking or modern-day slavery.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, Qatar and the UAE have supported and funded a variety of anti-democratic actors in other countries. The UAE in particular appears to be the Arab regime most committed to combating democratic progress or the advancement of human rights in the region, including in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Morocco. The rulers of the UAE seem to perceive the advancement of democratic rights anywhere in the Arab world as a threat to their own grip on power.<sup>12</sup>

As such, neither Qatar nor the UAE is a moderate regime worthy of praise. Nonetheless, extensive propaganda praising each of these regimes as indispensable U.S. “allies”<sup>13</sup> is spread constantly by U.S. officials as well as by U.S.-based organizations, companies, think tanks, and universities that are funded by or engaged in business with the two states.

## Recommendations

It is simply not possible to support human rights *and* to support dictatorship. One must choose. Supporting one of those means opposing the other, and our government, tragically, consistently supports dictatorship across the region rather than democracy, and with disastrous yet predictable

---

<sup>10</sup> “Global democracy has a very bad year,” *The Economist*, February 2, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2021/02/02/global-democracy-has-a-very-bad-year>

<sup>11</sup> Kali Robinson, “What is the Kafala system?” Council on Foreign Relations, March 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-kafala-system>; Mustafa Kadri, “The UAE’s Kafala System: Harmless or Human Trafficking?” in *Dubai’s Role in Facilitating Corruption and Global Illicit Financial Flows*, eds. Matthew T. Page and Jodi Vittori, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/07/07/uae-s-kafala-system-harmless-or-human-trafficking-pub-82188>

<sup>12</sup> “Why Saudis and UAE want to destroy hope for Arab democracy,” *Democracy Digest*, June 11, 2019, <https://www.demdigest.org/why-saudis-and-uae-want-to-destroy-hope-for-arab-democracy/>

<sup>13</sup> Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia are not in fact allies of the United States. None is a member of NATO, nor are these three among the seventeen states currently designated by the United States as Major Non-NATO Allies: “Major Non-NATO Ally Status Fact Sheet,” U.S. Department of State, January 20, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/major-non-nato-ally-status/>. Nonetheless, these three countries are often referred to informally—and incorrectly—as U.S. allies by U.S. officials, members of Congress, and many others in the Washington policy community and media. For one such example, see, Jim Garamone, “U.S.-Egypt Strategic Relationship a Top Priority, Esper Says,” U.S. Defense Department, July 19, 2019, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/1919526/us-egypt-strategic-relationship-a-top-priority-esper-says/>; for another example see, FRONTLINE, “The FRONTLINE Interview: Ali Shihabi,” PBS, September 30, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-frontline-interview-ali-shihabi/>

consequences. To improve U.S. policy toward the MENA region, this must *fundamentally* change. Our government must support human rights and oppose the brutality of dictatorship. What would this mean in practice? It would involve so many policy changes implemented over a number of years, a genuine reorientation of how Washington views and engages with the region, but I would like to highlight three main suggestions.

My first recommendation is simply that the United States should end support for dictators. While cutting off such support entirely may not be realistic overnight, the United States should undertake immediate efforts to move in this direction. Conveniently, numerous federal laws already ban weapons sales or military aid to regimes guilty of egregious human rights abuses. That means that the dominant form of U.S. engagement with the region is in fact illegal under our own laws—laws that successive administrations have blatantly ignored. Congress—led by members of the Lantos Commission—should aggressively demand and enforce the executive branch’s compliance with these laws.

These laws include, but are not limited to, the Foreign Assistance Act, Sections 116 and 502B of which prohibit U.S. security or economic assistance “to any country the government of which engages in a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights” unless the U.S. president issues a specific waiver.<sup>14</sup> In practice, successive administrations have chosen to disregard this language and Congress has failed to provide necessary oversight to ensure compliance. This must change. In the case of Egypt, additional relevant legislation should have been applied. Section 7008 of the annual appropriations act for State and Foreign Operations prohibits any foreign aid “to the government of any country whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup d’etat or decree” and shall not be resumed until “a democratically elected government has taken office.” This language certainly should have applied following the 2013 coup. The Obama administration tragically elected to use a loophole to avoid a straightforward application of this law eight years ago, an error that the Biden administration and Congress ought to correct now by suspending aid as should have been done then. This administration’s firm response to the recent coup in Burma has been appropriate, but has also highlighted the tendency to not hold dictatorships in the Middle East to the same standard, even when required by U.S. law.

My second recommendation is that whenever there *is* progress toward democratization in the Middle East, supporting that progress should be a top priority. In the past decade, the *only* country making real progress on democracy or human rights is Tunisia. Therefore, supporting Tunisian democracy should be the number one priority for the United States in the region. Sadly, it has been more of an afterthought.

---

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Foreign Assistance Act of 1961*, 87th Cong., 1961, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Foreign%20Assistance%20Act%20Of%201961.pdf>

What would prioritizing support for Tunisian democracy look like in practice? First, the United States should seek to reward the progress toward democracy in Tunisia by upgrading and strengthening the U.S.-Tunisia relationship. This could include negotiations toward a free trade agreement as part of a broader sustained effort to strengthen economic ties. Tunisia should be the country in the region mentioned most often by U.S. leaders, with every mention emphasizing the importance of Tunisia's democratic transition. It should also be the country in the region most frequently visited by senior U.S. officials, including the President and Secretary of State, with such visits focusing on identifying opportunities for strengthening Tunisian democracy and the bilateral relationship.

Over a period of a few years, U.S. foreign aid should be reallocated away from corrupt dictatorships and used instead to bolster Tunisia's economy and its democratic transition. Tunisia should become the largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid in the region, with serious efforts to maximize the positive impact of such aid for Tunisia's economy and democracy. In addition, the U.S. government should use some foreign aid for Tunisia to reward the country's completion of key steps required by Tunisia's constitution, such as the formation of the Constitutional Court. Ideally, President Biden should appoint a high-level special envoy for Tunisia's democratic transition to lead the coordination of an interagency effort to carry out all of the above and also to coordinate multilaterally with other democratic countries in supporting Tunisia. Such an approach should have been adopted a decade ago, but it is not too late to have an impact. If the Biden administration is unwilling to treat the only country in the region undertaking a fragile democratic transition as the most important country in the region, then it may as well retire its lofty rhetoric about the centrality of democracy and human rights in its foreign policy.

My third recommendation is that Congress should actively fight against the pervasive, corrupt influence of dictatorships here in Washington. This includes all of the authoritarian regimes of the region, with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco as the worst offenders. Members of the Lantos Commission should firmly oppose the inclusion of witnesses at congressional hearings from any organization funded by authoritarian regimes. In addition, Congress should pass legislation barring anyone who has served in the executive or legislative branch from employment with such organizations, and barring anyone who has been on the payroll of dictatorships from government service.

These steps would help to diminish the influence in Washington of organizations funded by dictatorships, and could cause these organizations to reconsider their decision to accept such funds.

Thank you once again for convening this important hearing and for giving me the opportunity to testify.