

# Beyond Rhetoric: How Should the Biden Administration Support Human Rights and Democracy in the Middle East and North Africa?

Fifteen Experts Respond

Edited by Hanan Abdulhadi and Amy Hawthorne  
June 2021

The Biden administration has made support for human rights and democracy around the world a prominent rhetorical focus of its foreign policy. Soon after taking office, President Joseph R. Biden pledged to **center** U.S. foreign policy “on the defense of democracy and the protection of human rights” and to **pursue** “diplomacy rooted in America’s most cherished democratic values: defending freedom, championing opportunity, upholding universal rights, respecting the rule of law, and treating every person with dignity.” Following up on these presidential commitments, Secretary of State Antony Blinken has promised that the Biden-Harris administration will “**prioritize**” human rights in U.S. foreign policy and “**stand** against human rights abuses wherever they occur, regardless of whether the perpetrators are adversaries or partners.” **Other** senior administration **officials** have echoed these themes.

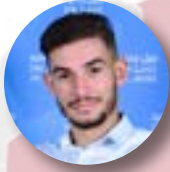
What should this professed new emphasis on rights and democracy mean for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), home to so many authoritarian regimes, including U.S. “partners” notorious for their human rights abuses, and to several countries mired in violent conflict? To spotlight perspectives from the region itself, POMED invited 15 human rights defenders, democracy advocates, independent journalists, and civic activists from 15 MENA countries to respond briefly to the following question:

*What are the most important steps for the Biden administration to take, or the most crucial issues on which the administration should focus, in order to improve the human rights situation, support democratic values and institutions, or push back against authoritarianism in your country?*

We are pleased to publish their responses below. These contributions represent a variety of perspectives and address an array of issues facing the countries of the region. We hope that the Biden administration will take seriously the recommendations presented here as it seeks to implement policies in line with its stated commitment to support human rights and democracy.

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## ALGERIA

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In most popular revolutions that strive to achieve fundamental change, civil society organizations have played an active role. In Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution, for example, syndicates, NGOs, and student associations helped a new generation emerge as political players and aided the protest movement in framing its demands in a clear roadmap.

In Algeria, we have the Hirak, a popular movement filled with young people but lacking strong participation by civil society organizations, an absence which has hindered the movement.

When it began in February 2019 to demand the resignation of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and the handing over of power to the people, the Hirak did not create a formal leadership structure or establish representation within civil society, fearing that doing so would undermine its popular demands and make it vulnerable to a takeover by other political forces. Initially this approach benefitted the movement. But after Bouteflika resigned in April 2019 and the regime's civilian façade fell, the Hirak found itself without representation in negotiations with the military establishment. This enabled the military to contain the crisis of the national

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leadership vacuum in just a few months by cracking down on the Hirak's most prominent figures and by imposing its own political roadmap. Playing on existing ideological, ethnic, and identity tensions within society, the regime managed to shift the narrative from the Hirak's message of "the people versus the establishment" to its own message of "the people versus the people."

One reason for this situation is that Algeria suffers from a severe shortage of civil society organizations that can help young people—the demographic majority in the country—gain political awareness and skills, play the political game, and prepare to assume leadership positions in the near future. Simply put, we need to build a new political class of youth. This is especially pertinent in light of the legislative and local elections this year in Algeria.

As a young social and political activist, I believe that the Biden administration's top priority for Algeria should be to help civil society organizations in our country develop capacity-building and leadership programs for Algerian youth. Such support would serve the public interest and would stimulate progress in various fields, helping to achieve long-term security and political stability in Algeria and, eventually, across the region.

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## EGYPT

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Improving Egypt's human rights record is a steep climb. The security apparatus has effectively nationalized the public domain in the name of “countering terrorism.” It controls elections and other political processes, distributes economic opportunities to cronies, and shuts down channels of participation in public affairs. It censors print and audio-visual media outlets and polices digital freedoms by blocking access to more than 500 websites in a witch-hunt against free expression online. None of this repression has made Egypt more stable. To the contrary, crises have been piling up—most recently, an escalating water dispute with Ethiopia over its filling of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which will curtail Egyptians' share of Nile water.

In such a context, when parliament is subservient to the government and the judiciary is unable or unwilling to hold officials accountable for grave human rights violations, civil society—in its broadest sense—represents the last bastion of resistance to state repression and the only hope for a reversal of the authoritarian slide. The solutions to Egypt's pressing challenges are pluralism, democracy, and the right to participate in public affairs, all of which require free minds and free speech.

Human rights defenders and organizations, members of political parties and groups, journalists, media professionals, lawyers, scholars, intellectuals, artists, community leaders, trade union and syndicate leaders, and entrepreneurs are all catalysts for progress on political, social, economic, and human rights issues. Egypt's most powerful figures, those who have benefited from the authoritarian slide, know this well. And that is why those civil society actors who champion progress constantly face government attacks, judicial harassment, and media smear campaigns. Many have been subjected to torture and other ill treatment, enforced disappearance, inhumane prison conditions and medical negligence, lengthy pre-trial detention, and unfair trials resulting in harsh sentences.

Unfortunately, the Trump administration's “**blank check**” policy toward Egypt's regime made this situation worse. As a first step toward changing course in Egypt, the Biden administration can contribute to human rights and democratic progress by closely monitoring attacks against civil society and by helping to relieve civil society actors from such attacks. The new administration also should bolster its efforts to press for the release of imprisoned human rights defenders, activists, members of political groups, media professionals, lawyers, and intellectuals. Such releases would not only bring relief to political prisoners and their families, they would also signal to Egyptian civil society that the tide is about to turn and that participation in public affairs will once again be possible.

“THE SOLUTIONS TO EGYPT'S PRESSING CHALLENGES ARE PLURALISM, DEMOCRACY, AND THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE IN PUBLIC AFFAIRS, ALL OF WHICH REQUIRE FREE MINDS AND FREE SPEECH.”

## IRAN



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The human rights issue that the Biden administration can address most effectively in Iran is the harm that U.S. financial sanctions are inflicting on ordinary people there. In providing sanctions relief to Iranians, President Biden can drive home the point that human rights include economic and social rights as well as political rights. In fact, considering their devastating impact on the economic and social welfare of ordinary Iranians, the crushing financial sanctions imposed by the Trump administration—and so far maintained by the Biden team—constitute a human rights violation.

As part of its “maximum pressure” campaign, the Trump administration targeted Iran’s financial and industrial sectors, including its central bank and oil and gas industries, with crippling primary and secondary sanctions. Trump’s policy **failed** to achieve its **stated** goals of changing Iran’s regional policies and forcing Iran to renegotiate the 2015 nuclear deal—or its unstated goal of regime change. But the sanctions, along with the COVID-19 pandemic that has **ravaged** Iran, have pushed Iran’s mismanaged economy deeper into crisis, leading to widespread **suffering**.

With Iran’s currency losing **half** its value since April 2020 and inflation reaching **39 percent this year**, reports indicate that **poverty** has **risen** sharply. The implications include increasing levels of food insecurity, health complications, domestic violence, and suicide. Sanctions and the resulting economic crisis have had a disproportionate impact on **middle-class women**, who have seen significant drops in living standards, social standing, and workforce participation. On the healthcare front, U.S. sanctions have made it extremely **difficult** for Iranians to access some essential medicines and medical equipment. During the pandemic, sanctions have **hobbled** the healthcare system and **constrained** the government’s ability to purchase vaccines.

Sanctions also have crushed Iranian civil society, affecting activists who have been pushing for democracy and civil rights for decades. NGOs that once worked to promote high-level issues like democracy and human rights have had to switch to helping people meet their most basic needs. Meanwhile, as ordinary Iranians’ economic conditions deteriorate, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, a main target of U.S. sanctions, has only **grown** richer and more **powerful** under the sanctions regime.

The Biden administration, which says it will stand up for human rights “**everywhere**,” should take decisive and immediate steps to **unblock** Iranian funds abroad to enable Iran to purchase COVID vaccines and **engage** more easily in humanitarian trade such as importing medicine and food more easily. The administration also should issue a blanket license for humanitarian organizations to provide aid to Iranians suffering as a result of the pandemic. This is the humane and human rights-centered approach to addressing the needs of Iranian people while Tehran and Washington decide how to move forward on the nuclear file.

“CONSIDERING THEIR DEVASTATING IMPACT ON THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL WELFARE OF ORDINARY IRANIANS, THE CRUSHING FINANCIAL SANCTIONS IMPOSED BY [THE UNITED STATES] CONSTITUTE A HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION.”

## IRAQ



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The political transformation underway in Iraq since 2003 has included severe waves of violence that continue to this day. Throughout this process, the most basic of human rights have been violated, and multiple political setbacks have increased the lack of transparency and fostered distrust between decision-makers and citizens. Violence has become the primary political tool, as shown by the fact that all political forces have sought to use armed wings to consolidate their positions by force. Years of sectarian war, terrorist attacks, and the rise of the Islamic State also severely disrupted society. And when, after a series of protests over the span of ten years, popular anger exploded in 2019-20, the authorities responded to demonstrations demanding constitutionally guaranteed rights by using arbitrary and repressive tactics.

These events underscore the fact that the post-Saddam political system was not built with any consideration for human rights or societal representation. This system has not been able to generate temporary solutions or strategic plans. Nor was the state based on a system of institutions or a concept of citizenship. Instead, it was built on ethnic and sectarian grounds, without any vision for the future or any mechanisms for an equitable distribution of opportunities and wealth. And although many articles in the Iraqi Constitution stipulate respect for human rights principles, law enforcement authorities apply only what serves their interests, which do not align with those of Iraqi citizens—particularly ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities.

“ALTHOUGH MANY ARTICLES IN THE IRAQI CONSTITUTION STIPULATE RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS PRINCIPLES, LAW ENFORCEMENT AUTHORITIES APPLY ONLY WHAT SERVES THEIR INTERESTS...”

For all these reasons, it is of the utmost importance to correct the state’s path, along with all its official institutions. This can be done in part by providing technical support to help Iraqis:

- counter the rhetoric of incitement, hatred, and racism and confront the violent extremism that spread through society and gave rise to violent groups outside state institutions as well as inside them—particularly inside security agencies. This effort could be supplemented by adopting new tools to promote public awareness of the principles of democracy, human rights, and freedoms;
- make judicial reforms in line with the concepts of rights and freedoms. Judicial institutions are the most important in the country and reforming them will help resolve many other problems confronting Iraq; and
- empower groups that lack political representation, especially the movement that emerged from the 2019 protests and other groups that have been marginalized for political or ethnic reasons.

## JORDAN



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The deterioration of freedom of expression in Jordan is at the forefront of issues hindering the country's development and threatening its long-term stability. Over the past ten years, Jordanians have seen the security apparatus targeting activists, journalists, and civil society representatives through arrests, jailings, and intimidation tactics. They have seen opposition parties dissolved or repressed, the short-lived Teachers' Syndicate banned, and NGO laws used to suffocate civil society organizations.

Yes, Jordan has been a constant target of foreign threats that could shake its stability, and it has long relied on its security institutions to safeguard the status quo. But instability also originates domestically, where an increasingly disgruntled population lacks the means to hold institutions accountable for bad governance, corruption, or indeed any issue of public interest. Instead, oppression has been the state's consistent answer to domestic discontent, begging the question of whether a country's stability can be maintained when the people cannot hold their governing class accountable.

One need only look to the media scene for an example of the state's repression. While Jordan's media has always been a deeply contested space, in the past decade it has faced growing censorship (both state-driven and self-imposed) and restrictions on access to information, leaving little space for independent media to thrive without fear of reprisal. The red lines—and when the state chooses to apply them—are constantly shifting, causing journalists to operate under increasingly precarious conditions.

The result has been the silencing of the most critical stories facing the country. This is most striking when controversial political events result in domestic news blackouts, leaving an entire population starved for information on what is happening in their own country and forced to rely on foreign media, with their incomplete local understanding, to fill the information void.

Most Jordanians can go online to access alternatives to the government's narrative. But even online, we are largely kept in the dark about what is really happening. Public discourse is polluted by an onslaught of misinformation and disinformation, ranging from speculation and rumor to sponsored false accounts.

Without a vibrant, engaged, and informed civil society, strong independent media, and a civic space free from interference by the security apparatus, Jordan's domestic problems will continue to fester. Repression will continue to erode trust in state institutions and drive society towards inevitable and prolonged confrontation with a security state bent on preserving an untenable status quo.

“WITHOUT A VIBRANT, ENGAGED, AND INFORMED CIVIL SOCIETY, STRONG INDEPENDENT MEDIA, AND A CIVIC SPACE FREE FROM INTERFERENCE BY THE SECURITY APPARATUS, JORDAN'S DOMESTIC PROBLEMS WILL CONTINUE TO FESTER.”

## KUWAIT



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One of the most important rights issues confronting Kuwait is the government's tightening grip on freedom of expression. While this right is enshrined in the constitution, the government has been steadily eroding it over the last decade. The clampdown began with the government's response to **protests** in 2011, which were sparked by a corruption scandal involving the government and parliament. In the years that followed, the government issued several new laws that curtailed expression. The 2012 national unity law, the 2014 communications law, and the 2016 cybercrime law **have drawn new red lines** for speech and expression and introduced measures for policing cyberspace (including social media, an important platform for public debate in Kuwait).

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With these new laws, prosecutions related to freedom of expression have increased significantly. A wide range of people in Kuwait, both **citizens** and **non-citizens**, have been targeted and punished for expressing their opinions peacefully. For example, the authorities have deported foreign migrants for tweets criticizing the governing system and handed down prison sentences to **Bidoon** minorities for **peaceful protests in 2019** demanding their rights. Such cases have contributed to a general culture of fear in Kuwait, with residents and citizens alike choosing to self-censor.

This issue requires close attention from Kuwaiti policymakers who should reevaluate and amend these and other relevant laws, and in particular the cybercrime law, which defines crimes so vaguely that it easily lends itself to abuse—especially given the importance of social media to public debate in Kuwait. The current situation restricts people's agency to express their views for fear of being detained, prosecuted, or deported. Civil society, members of parliament, and the government of Kuwait should work collectively to address the problem and to promote a culture in which freedom of expression is uncurtailed. The Biden administration, for its part, should closely follow cases brought against individuals for exercising their right to free expression and support local reforms to protect that right.

**THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION, FOR ITS PART, SHOULD CLOSELY FOLLOW CASES BROUGHT AGAINST INDIVIDUALS FOR EXERCISING THEIR RIGHT TO FREE EXPRESSION AND SUPPORT LOCAL REFORMS TO PROTECT THAT RIGHT.**

## LEBANON

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Lebanon's fundamental governance problem is the control that former warlords, militias, and corrupt sectarian politicians maintain over the political system and the impunity they enjoy. It is crucial for the Biden administration to recognize that until their grip is broken and until the Lebanese people can freely choose their leaders and hold them accountable, our economic crisis and political dysfunction will only worsen. It is equally crucial to recognize that Lebanon can be saved and that its constitution establishes a foundation for good governance.

The 1989 Ta'if Agreement, which ended the 1975–1990 civil war, laid the groundwork for reforms to eradicate sectarianism, hold free and fair elections, and decentralize administration. But the warlords stepped all over the agreement and the constitution when they granted themselves amnesty for war crimes in 1990. Lebanon has been paying the price ever since.

The post-war Syrian occupation institutionalized corruption and depleted the state's capacity to govern. Gerrymandered elections kept a pro-Syrian majority in charge, and political parties funded clientelist networks that provided services in exchange for votes. After Syrian troops finally left in 2005, Syria- and Iran-backed Hezbollah grew stronger politically and militarily, and it has held an effective veto over the cabinet since. Corruption and impunity deepened. Sectarian leaders have failed at managing everything from health care, to electricity, to education—even garbage collection.

In the past year, things have deteriorated further. The August 2020 Beirut port explosion was one of the most shocking consequences of corruption that Lebanon has ever experienced, and it opened a festering wound for the world to see. The men who made the Ta'if Agreement and were entrusted with public safety knowingly left explosives at the port. But holding them accountable is impossible because of their impunity, their grip over the judiciary, and Lebanon's illegitimate electoral process. Today, Lebanon is collapsing and its people have been taken hostage by a group of former warlords unwilling to make concessions, except to each other.


The diaspora and international friends are doing all they can to help maintain a lifeline for the Lebanese people. But the only way out is to create a functional cabinet that is not held captive by corruption, weapons, and sectarianism and to hold a free and fair election in 2022.

In politics, nothing is predestined. The future depends on what we do now. Intra-confessional parties and new political platforms can lay the foundation for reform. Power-sharing systems can evolve from sectarian to more liberal—Northern Ireland's experience is one example. Discrediting the political class that has held onto power in our country through a corrupt system can free the Lebanese people to advocate for their rights and well-being. Lebanon can and should be saved.

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## LIBYA

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Libya is at a pivotal stage, with a chance for lasting peace after a decade of recurring civil wars that exhausted its people and upended its stability. With UN mediation, the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) has agreed on a **roadmap** leading to national elections scheduled for December 24, 2021, and delegates have chosen a Government of National Unity (GNU) to steer the country through the elections. Support from the Biden administration will be crucial to keep the transition on track.

In this regard, Biden administration officials have **stated** that the upcoming elections are a U.S. priority. International and local attention will also be focused on other goals included in the Roadmap, namely the reconstruction of infrastructure and institutions destroyed in the conflicts, resumption of basic service provision, and stabilization of oil exports. All of these things are important. But devoting too much attention to them could create an atmosphere in which it will be convenient to turn a blind eye to violations of human rights and freedoms. With the Libyan people's growing aspirations for positive change, the Biden administration should be careful not to compromise on democratic principles in favor of short-term stability.

To this end, the administration should help ensure that the GNU is following through on priorities described in the Roadmap such as:

- promoting human rights, protecting human rights defenders, and taking all measures necessary to respect civil and political rights, which have deteriorated significantly during the civil wars. According to Freedom House, Libya currently **ranks** in the bottom 20 countries in the world in terms of civil and political liberties.
- removing obstacles to and **restrictions** on civil society work. The number of active civil society organizations in Libya has declined in recent years due to armed conflict and donor flight. The GNU can do much to improve the environment for NGOs.
- adhering to principles of accountability and financial transparency to ensure that Libyan assets and funds are not squandered or stolen.

There is also a potential U.S. role in pressing social media companies to curb the spread of lies and misinformation in Libya that fueled the violence and hatred of the last decade. At the same time, great care must be taken to ensure that the Libyan authorities do not take undue steps to suppress expression or undermine privacy.

The Biden administration has an important opportunity to promote a new model for peaceful change in Libya. But for this to succeed, the U.S. approach must be deeply rooted in humanitarian values, in particular democratic principles and universal human rights.

“THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION SHOULD BE CAREFUL NOT TO COMPROMISE ON DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES IN FAVOR OF SHORT-TERM STABILITY.”

## MOROCCO



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Human rights have been in retreat in Morocco in recent years. The authorities have **banned** many demonstrations and general rights activities, recently **using** the coronavirus pandemic as a rationale, and **used** unjustified violence to disperse protests. Human rights defenders, political activists, and independent journalists are under growing **assault**: in an alarming new **tactic**, media sites close to the authorities attempt to insult, defame, and slander activists and journalists using information about their private lives. Arrests and prosecutions for human rights and political work, or simply free expression, have **increased**. Rights associations are also **under siege**—the Ministry of Interior often blocks their establishment or makes it difficult or impossible for them to operate as required by law. In addition, Morocco has violated numerous international human rights **agreements** and treaties to which it is a signatory. Across the board, there has been a significant decline in rights and freedoms in Morocco.

All this has contributed to rising tensions and made Moroccans feel as though they are living out a suspended sentence. Today, a general atmosphere of fear prevails in the public sphere following the return of the security approach.

A decade ago, amidst the Arab Spring, Morocco was supposed to be heading down a democratic path. The expectation was that Morocco would move toward stronger institutions, fair and transparent elections, and a parliamentary monarchy with a king who reigns but does not govern. Its deviation from this path necessitates that the United States press Morocco to move in the direction of restoring respect for democratic discourse and practices.

Unfortunately, the Trump administration's complete lack of interest in human rights allowed the Moroccan authorities latitude for democratic backsliding and repression. That is why Joe Biden's election gave us hope that the United States will devote the needed attention to human rights and democracy in Morocco. The Biden administration should prioritize the issue of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience and promote policies that would restore respect for human rights work and protect human rights defenders who are subjected to various forms of harassment. In general we expect the Biden administration to advocate for rights and freedoms and to pressure Morocco to respect its human rights obligations. The anticipated general election in September provides a useful focal point for such diplomatic engagement.

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## PALESTINE



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The Biden administration should consistently prioritize human rights and international law in its policy toward Palestine. Instead of normalizing the occupation, the new administration should address the deteriorating situation in Palestine, where Israel continues to implement an annexationist agenda while subjecting Palestinians to dispossession, fragmentation, segregation, violence, persecution, and other systemic rights violations without redress.

As Israel continues to entrench this reality, with support from the United States and the international community, prospects for a meaningful peace process are diminishing. The United States should stop helping to perpetuate the cycle of human degradation and impunity. The administration's steps to restore relations with the Palestinians and to renew aid to Palestinian refugees are welcome, but they should not be used to coerce Palestinians or come at the expense of their inalienable rights to self-determination, freedom, and dignity.

The Biden administration should reverse all policies enacted by the Trump administration, including relocating the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and accepting Israel's sovereignty over the occupied Syrian Golan. It should acknowledge that a return to the policy status quo is insufficient and will not yield sorely needed results grounded in accountability and justice.

Due to Israeli forces' continued use of excessive and lethal force against Palestinians—resulting in the killing and injury of thousands, including many children and youth—the United States should immediately halt weapons sales to Israel. U.S. military aid must be conditioned on respect for human rights and international law and the protection of Palestinian life.

In light of the International Criminal Court's (ICC) recent announcement confirming the initiation of investigations into alleged crimes committed in the occupied Palestinian territory, the Biden administration's ending of sanctions and visa restrictions against ICC personnel is a good, albeit overdue, step. The administration must build on this by not obstructing the Court's work. Seeking justice and redress through legal recourse, including via an independent and legal institution such as the ICC, is a guaranteed right from which Palestinians should not be excluded.

In the UN Human Rights Council, the United States should realign its positions on Palestine in accordance with international law and its obligations to promote human rights. To this end, the United States should refrain from obstructing relevant UN resolutions and mandates and be mindful of the UN's historic responsibility on the question of Palestine.

Finally, the Biden administration should protect the right to freedom of speech for individuals, activists, human rights defenders, and organizations advocating for Palestinian human rights using peaceful means, including boycotts in the United States and abroad. The administration must ensure that legitimate criticism of the State of Israel is not equated with anti-Semitism or criminalized.

“ U.S. MILITARY AID MUST BE CONDITIONED ON RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND INTERNATIONAL LAW AND THE PROTECTION OF PALESTINIAN LIFE. ”

## SAUDI ARABIA

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In recalibrating its relationship with Saudi Arabia and advancing human rights, the Biden administration should focus on the problem of the unconstrained and unprecedented control that de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) exerts over the country.

Unchecked power has given rise to violent and aggressive behavior by Saudi Arabia at home and abroad. The U.S. administration should promote the development of a system of checks and balances to prevent the exploitation of power by MBS or others. This involves overhauling authoritarian legislation, including counterterrorism and cybersecurity laws. It also requires reining in the *Presidency of State Security*, a body under the Royal Court that enjoys vast authority to conduct repressive operations. In addition, the United States should advocate for transparency in judicial proceedings, especially those in which Saudi activists and intellectuals are being prosecuted for alleged corruption, treason, or threats to national security. As it stands, it is extremely difficult, indeed sometimes impossible, for Saudis to monitor their government's performance in such prosecutions.

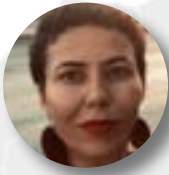
The Biden administration must press the issue of the thousands of Saudi political prisoners and prisoners of conscience who remain incarcerated simply for exercising their basic rights. At the same time, Washington should not confuse MBS's conditional *release* of a few high-profile prisoners with meaningful reform. At a minimum, once released, these Saudi citizens must be able to engage in public affairs without harassment or fear.

If an unhinged MBS continues to rule without constraints, and makes only symbolic concessions to the Biden administration, Saudi Arabia's governance crisis will deepen. This crisis has already given rise to state-sponsored ultranationalist sentiment, religious edicts, and propaganda and misinformation campaigns to legitimize repression and the crown prince's policies, while tolerating zero criticism. It has also led the Saudi state to waste resources on unrealistic projects; engage in unlawful extraterritorial extortion, abduction, and killing; and erase a budding civil society of journalists and informed commentators, human rights activists, feminists, statesmen, and religious reformers. In a country that has been mired in religious radicalism and oppression for decades, a robust civil society is essential for democratic development.

The United States is well positioned to apply considerable leverage in dealing with Saudi Arabia to help bring about change. Congress can enact resolutions and legislation, and both Congress and the administration can engage with Saudi officials to promote pathways for political participation, transparency, and constraints on power. Failing to do so will only lead to more acts of aggression by the Saudi leadership and will strengthen the autocratic alliances that have been gaining momentum in the region and worldwide.

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## SYRIA



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What began in Syria ten years ago as a peaceful uprising characterized by popular demands for freedom, democracy, and human rights transformed into a complex, internationalized conflict that has taken an almost unimaginable toll on the Syrian population. There have been hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths, tens of thousands of detainees, more than 100,000 missing persons, and millions of internally displaced people and refugees. Cities and infrastructure have been destroyed, and an entire generation of Syrian children has been deprived of education.

Finding a political solution to end the conflict that has wrought this immense suffering remains a priority for Syrian activists and human rights advocates. But any solution that guarantees the interests of the Syrian regime and other parties to the conflict without addressing the victims' demands for accountability and justice will lead to new conflicts. Sustainable peace in Syria can be achieved only by delivering accountability for the perpetrators and justice for the victims—and the United States must not accept any solution that falls short of this. Likewise, the voluntary return of millions of refugees will not be possible without a political transformation in Syria that prevents a recurrence of the human rights violations that led them to seek refuge in the first place. Such transformation must start with holding perpetrators on all sides accountable for their crimes.

To this end, litigation in several European countries against Syrian officials for human rights violations has started to establish a path for justice. In February, for example, a German court's **conviction** of a Syrian security official for torture set a precedent for the principle of universal justice in addressing the Assad regime's crimes against the Syrian population. And last month, a group of survivors of the 2013 chemical weapons attacks in Douma and Eastern Ghouta **filed** a criminal complaint in France against the Syrian government. While individual prosecutions can only provide limited accountability for the Syrian people, they represent a step forward in the long road to justice and should be supported by the United States.

The United States also should prioritize the release of detainees and the resolution of missing persons cases. Thousands of detainees in Syria are at risk of dying from either COVID-19 or torture and must be released. The families of disappeared Syrians deserve to know the fate of their relatives. The Biden administration must push on these issues during any peace negotiations with the Syrian regime.

“LITIGATION IN SEVERAL EUROPEAN COUNTRIES AGAINST SYRIAN OFFICIALS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS HAS STARTED TO ESTABLISH A PATH FOR JUSTICE.”

## TUNISIA

**Amine Ghali***Director, Al Kawakibi Democracy Transition Center (KADEM)*[www.kawakibi.org](http://www.kawakibi.org)

**T**unisia's difficult economic conditions pose a growing threat to our democratic transition. If the United States wants Tunisian democracy to succeed, it should pay close attention to this situation.

Since the 2011 revolution, Tunisia has made huge democratic gains, most notably drafting a progressive constitution, holding regular transparent elections, and enshrining protections for freedom of speech and association. But our economic transformation lags dangerously behind. As a result, Tunisia continues to suffer from the same woes that existed under the dictatorship: poor governance, clientelism, corruption, and obstacles to innovation. Unemployment and underemployment, socio-economic injustice, and lack of economic opportunity remain pervasive. The pandemic has made the situation worse.

The dismal situation and growing hardships are frustrating Tunisians who feel that after the sacrifices of a decade-long transition, democracy is not delivering the expected prosperity. In fact, many Tunisians are losing hope and confidence in democracy altogether. Nostalgia for the dictatorship, fueled by local and international spoilers, is **gaining** momentum, as many Tunisians choose to forget that dictatorship also failed to bring prosperity to the vast majority of the population.

Thus, U.S. support for Tunisia's democracy today means first and foremost support for an economic transformation. This should go beyond short-term budgetary assistance and should involve much more robust help for Tunisians to achieve this transformation. Possible measures could include support for modernizing the outdated economic legal corpus, cutting the chain of clientelism, tackling corruption, boosting the technology sector, and reforming and modernizing economic institutions such as the Central Bank. A leading U.S. role in promoting a transformation will encourage other partners to follow suit.

Given the relatively modest size of the Tunisian economy, well-designed international engagement can make a difference. Progress is urgently needed to improve Tunisians' lives and to restore confidence in the democratic process. The stakes are high. Tunisia cannot afford to slide back into authoritarianism. Neither the Middle East and North Africa nor the free world can afford to lose the region's sole democratic transition.

**U.S. SUPPORT FOR  
TUNISIA'S DEMOCRACY  
TODAY MEANS FIRST AND  
FOREMOST SUPPORT  
FOR AN ECONOMIC  
TRANSFORMATION.**

## TURKEY

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The biggest challenge to democracy in Turkey in the coming years is the further erosion of election integrity. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has already severely weakened two pillars of fair elections: pluralistic media and judicial independence. In addition, the AKP government has disenfranchised Turkey's Kurdish voters by appointing its own bureaucrats to replace elected mayors in Kurdish cities and may even move to shut down the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the third-largest party in parliament.

As the 2023 election approaches, many polls indicate that the AKP is losing support after nearly 20 years in power. Rather than risk defeat, the ruling party—which has always highlighted its election victories to claim legitimacy—might be looking to tilt the playing field even more in its favor by making proper monitoring of the election impossible. In 2019, the Istanbul municipal elections were repeated under judicial order, resulting in a humiliating second-time defeat for the AKP candidate. The government may not have abided by this outcome without social media and independent election monitors accurately documenting the vote count and showing the public that the opposition candidate had won.

Two AKP laws passed last year may be designed to prevent exactly such independent reporting and monitoring in future elections. One law, enacted in July 2020, **forces** social media companies to remove content or accounts that the government deems “illegal” or “inappropriate.” Because of the AKP's near-total control (directly or by proxy) of print and broadcast media, social media is crucial to ensure a space for non-governmental reporting and for spreading awareness of electoral fraud or other irregularities. The new social media restrictions threaten not only freedom of speech and free media but also election integrity, as they could lead to news blackouts or censorship of election information that the government does not want the public to know.

Another law, passed in December, **allows** Turkish authorities to take over civil society organizations by appointing bureaucrats to lead them. The government maintains that these powers are needed to combat financial crimes, but human rights groups note that the law's scope expands far beyond this and could be wielded to silence certain NGOs for political reasons. As Turkish civil society has played a key role in promoting media pluralism and in organizing election monitoring, the law could be used to shut down associations that work in these areas.

Without independent electoral news and information and effective monitoring of voting and ballot-counting, proper investigation of allegations of voter fraud or of illegal efforts to shape election results becomes impossible. Such a situation would undermine confidence in the electoral system and threaten the future of democracy in Turkey.

“THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE TO DEMOCRACY IN TURKEY IN THE COMING YEARS IS THE FURTHER EROSION OF ELECTION INTEGRITY.”

## YEMEN

**Radhya al-Mutawakel**

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Since 2015, the United States has shielded Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and other members of the Saudi/UAE-led coalition in Yemen from diplomatic scrutiny for their role in the war. To become an effective broker, the Biden administration should condemn human rights abuses and international humanitarian and human rights law violations committed by all warring parties, including the coalition and the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council, along with the Yemeni government and the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group.

President Biden's February 4 **announcement** that the United States would end military support and weapons sales for the coalition's offensive operations in Yemen was a significant and necessary step. In light of the consistent disregard for international law by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, his administration should block the provision of all weapons, equipment, training, services, and maintenance to these countries.

The administration should immediately advance a holistic and credible accountability strategy for Yemen, including pursuing criminal justice for international crimes and reparations for victims. It should support the UN Human Rights Council Group of Eminent Experts (GEE), pursue its recommendations, ensure that it has sufficient resources, and encourage others—including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the Yemeni government, and the Houthis—to cooperate with it.

In addition, the United States should encourage UN Security Council engagement on Yemen, including by integrating discussion of the human rights dimensions of the conflict into the Council's monthly regular agenda and supporting language on justice and reparations in upcoming Council resolutions. The United States should also support a Council referral of the Yemen situation to the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Furthermore, the administration should conduct a full review of the impact of American operations in Yemen since the United States began using lethal force there nearly two decades ago. Assessments of the lawfulness of operations should consider all applicable international law requirements, including those that constrain the use of force and protect the right to life. The United States should publicly disclose the results of this review and acknowledge each instance of its use of lethal force.

Finally, the administration should back the longstanding demands of human rights and

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humanitarian groups to all warring parties. Such demands include:

- agreeing to a ceasefire;
- taking steps toward accountability and peace;
- respecting human rights and the laws of war;
- opening sea, land, and air ports, including Sana'a airport;
- ending the siege of Taiz and opening roads between all Yemeni cities and areas;
- paying public sector salaries;
- releasing arbitrarily detained and forcibly disappeared persons;
- allowing inspection and maintenance of the **FSO Safer**, a floating oil storage vessel abandoned off the coast of Hodeida; and
- ending restrictions on civil society, media, and humanitarian work.



**THE PROJECT ON MIDDLE EAST DEMOCRACY** is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization based in Washington, DC, that is dedicated to examining how genuine democracies can develop in the Middle East and how the United States can best support that process. Through dialogue, research and advocacy, POMED works to strengthen the constituency for U.S. policies that peacefully support reform in the Middle East. POMED research publications offer in-depth, original expert analysis of political developments in the Middle East as they relate to the prospects for genuine democracy in the region and to U.S. policy on democracy and human rights. The views expressed in POMED publications are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of POMED. For more information, please contact Deputy Director for Research Amy Hawthorne at [amy.hawthorne@pomed.org](mailto:amy.hawthorne@pomed.org).

