

Congressional Hearings on Human Rights in the Middle East

Concept: HRW/MENA to actively participate in a campaign with local NGOs in the region towards holding Congressional Hearings focusing on patterns of gross and systematic human rights violations throughout the region (the configuration to be more precisely defined, i.e., MENA, Greater Middle East to include Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, or centered on the countries recipient of US economic and/or military aid). Such comprehensive effort can put aside accusations of double standards in US foreign policy with preferential treatment of allied regimes (Israel, Saudi Arabia), narrowing the concern for the failed policy of “exporting democracy” into a more restricted but yet significant preoccupation with the universally shared core of human rights principles. A promised policy change by the current US administration and the need to strengthen peaceful dissenters throughout the region can find new bi-partisan allies in Congress supporting such endeavor.

The following bullet points are relevant for HRW/MENA:

- 1) NGOs in the region will support a higher concern with HR in their respective countries.
- 2) As an Israeli/American I would stress that this is also the case for supporting the US Congress monitoring gross human rights violations in the Occupied Territories. The post-Gaza War attacks on the reporting by NGOs will be enhanced by such concern.
- 3) Focusing on an entire region rather than a specific country will get away from the accusations of selective targeting. In the case of Israel, it may be difficult for officials to exclude themselves from scrutiny, as part of a region they want to belong to.
- 4) The connection of foreign aid and the absence of a pattern of systematic human rights violations has been made already in the 1970's with the 502B and Harkin Amendments to the Foreign Aid Bill, and the recollection of such ties is of importance for the regimes and public opinion in the region.
- 5) According to Mike Pozner (now responsible in the State Dept for the Bureau of Human Rights,.....) he recalls to have been the last to have encouraged holding Hearings on the OT in 1983. The assumption that no HR violations have occurred there since then is unacceptable to all. Mike is traveling in-January to Amman and there are opportunities to follow up some diplomatic consultations that have already taken place on the subject.
- 6) HRW has a leading role to play, given the salience of the US in the region, its historic role, previous experience in lobbying in DC defending of human rights activists and peaceful dissenters worldwide.
- 7) In the recent attacks against HRW the region was a focal point and accusations of selecting democracies as a target (Israel) can be best counteracted by public action and not only by checking size and contents of HRW statements and reports. Hence, I believe that calling for Hearings without exclusions in the region is a sound and effective choice for the organization.

- 8) Clearly, this effort requires the sustained and long term planning of dominant (rather than reactive) strategy. A suggestion has been made to constitute a working group in HRW/MENA composed by staff and members of the Advisory Board. I volunteer to be one of them.
- 9) At the same time, coordination with local NGOs (such as B'tselem who now has an office in DC) can also provide extra-help for lobbying in the region and in the US.

I hope that a joint endeavor of HRW staff and volunteers will bear fruit. I will be in DC till early February and then mostly in the Middle East till the end of June. In addition of a conference call, it may be worth considering a meeting here in Washington. Best, Edy Kaufman