

Promoting Religious Freedom During the Campaign Against Terrorism": Amy Hawthorne Written Answers to Follow-up Questions

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1. If Middle Eastern governments that have expressed support for the campaign against terrorism use that opportunity to crack down on Islamist political opponents not involved in violence or terrorism, what can the U.S. do to mitigate those actions? How can we separate legitimate efforts to contain violence from illegitimate repression of religious freedom?

A. As Middle Eastern governments seek to cooperate with the United States in the campaign against terrorism, among their first moves could be to grant their already-powerful security services even more latitude. Trying to ensure that these powers are not abused to the detriment of religious freedom and other human rights is, clearly, an immense challenge for the United States in this era of competing diplomatic priorities. Yet, this challenge must not be avoided if the war on terror is to succeed, rather than inadvertently to exacerbate repressive conditions in the Arab world in which extremism and intolerance thrive. If Arab governments launch wide "dragnets" sweeping up those who are moderate and denounce violence as well as those suspected of involvement in terrorist activities, the U.S. should vigorously remind those governments of their own national and international human rights obligations. The U.S. should also invoke the commitments of the ten Arab governments that are signatories to the U.S.-government sponsored June 2000 Warsaw Declaration on democracy. Of course, our diplomatic engagement on this issue will necessarily assume different levels of intensity depending on the country in question. Generally speaking, however, the U.S. should draw from a policy framework that includes close monitoring of Arab governments' domestic security actions (the U.S. should consult with a wide range of sources, including non-governmental watch-dog groups, to ensure a range of information and perspectives about those affected), private raising of concerns, and willingness to speak out publicly on occasion when merited. The most effective way for the U.S. to mitigate the potential negative effects of anti-terror security crackdowns is to engage Arab governments on political reform, participation, tolerance, the rule of law, and religious freedom. In the past, the U.S. has addressed these issues sporadically. The U.S. government must be vigilant about sending a clear, two-pronged message to our Arab partners in the campaign against terrorism: just as we seek and expect your security cooperation to fight terror, we also seek, and will assist you with, serious efforts to improve political and social conditions in your countries.

2. Some in Muslim countries complain publicly that the U.S. preaches human rights but supports repressive regimes. Does cooperation with such regimes allow the U.S. a greater opportunity to influence the policies of these regimes? How so?

United States relationships with countries throughout the world, including in the Middle East, are multi-dimensional and complex; in no country with which we maintain relations are democracy and human rights the primary elements of our bilateral relations. U.S. diplomatic efforts always seek to pursue a combination of security, economic, and political interests; these shift in priority depending on circumstances and needs. Given geostrategic realities, perfect consistency worldwide in the U.S. goals to promote democracy is impossible to achieve. For the U.S. government, for example, the pursuit of Arab-Israeli peace has at times been a higher priority in U.S.-Syrian relations than has the promotion of human rights there. Notably, though, following the events of September 11 there is a new opportunity for the United States to elevate the promotion of human rights and democracy to a higher level in the "mix of interests" it pursues in many Arab countries. A connection has been drawn among dismal political conditions in the Arab world, religious extremism, terrorism, and U.S. national security. The U.S. is starting to recognize that advancing a positive vision for the region, one that provides an alternative to terrorists' destructive ideology, should be a critical element of the campaign against terror, and that such a vision necessarily includes political reform and the protection of human rights. The U.S. government's close relations with key Arab governments does, in fact, afford significant potential to exercise our power of example as the world's leading democracy and our leverage with regional leaders. These leaders hold tremendous power within their own societies, so engaging with them to address the aspects of religious freedom and other human rights issues over which they have authority (e.g., the legal framework, upholding the rule of law, etc.) could have a positive impact. Our Arab partners may bristle when we speak out on human rights issues, but they always note (and sometimes rely on) our silence. What we say and do matters a great deal. These regimes are stronger than is sometimes assumed; they have the capacity, if not often the immediate political will, to respond to calls for reform without becoming seriously destabilized. Many in the Arab world would indeed welcome an elevation of human rights and democracy issues to a higher priority in U.S.-Middle East relations. This does not mean that they believe the United States government, however, should be the key actor in any domestic transformation. Most in the region recognize that the responsibility for democratic change, tolerance, and reform rests with the governments and citizens of the region, and would reject political change imposed from the outside. They also believe, however, that the United States and other countries do have a constructive role to play in the fostering of openness and reform in the region.