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From: sbwhoep [redacted]
Sent: Saturday, February 26, 2011 6:46 PM
To: H
Subject: H: FYI, article below, new intel coming soon. Govt in formation, Justice minister heading it. Sid

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<http://www.opendemocracy.net/shadi-mokhtari/george-bush-and-turn-to-human-rights-in-arab-world>

George Bush and the turn to human rights in the Arab world

Shadi Mokhtari, 25 February 2011

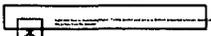
Some have linked the emergence of a strong human rights agenda in the Arab world with the policies of the last American president. In a way they are right: post-9/11 abuses overseen by the Bush administration were the tragedy that brought to light the urgency of claiming rights.

About the author

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In the stunning popular uprisings that have been sprouting up throughout the Arab world, the desire for the realization of rights seems ubiquitous. For this, some have argued, George W. Bush deserves some credit. In fact, there is a link to be made between recent developments and Bush administration policies. However, it is not so much that we are finally seeing the fruits of the Bush era's democracy and human rights promotion agenda, or that a liberated Iraq has now set an example for the rest of the region to follow. Rather, we are seeing the fruits of an Arab engagement with human rights which was in part spurred by the Bush Administration's array of post-9/11 policies thwarting human rights.

Before 9/11, the human rights idea was widely debated in the Arab world. Many voices including among Islamists argued that it was essentially a Western idea not compatible with Arab and Islamic values. It was also held that human rights were mainly an instrument the United States used to paint a moral veneer on self-interested agendas in the region. These arguments resonated with Arab populations because they tapped into widespread frustration with American policies. While they paid lip service to human rights internationally, the Arab world's authoritarian rulers were all too happy to exploit this popular disillusionment with human rights and even reinforce its association with American cultural and political hegemony.



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Arab activist

A particular event can trigger a rise or decline in rights consciousness in any country or culture in the world- East or West. Abu Ghraib served as a pivotal moment for human rights consciousness in the Arab world. Because the torture and abuse depicted was so widely seen as directed towards the Arab or Muslim man, many felt a profound sense of personal violation. As they grappled to formulate a response, they often found themselves invoking human rights. "Abu Ghraib probably brought home the concept of human rights more strongly than anything else. People started debating human rights issues in talking about Abu Ghraib... What is your right to be treated like a human being in dignity?" an Arab activist told me in Amman in 2006. Gauging public sentiment, some Arab leaders joined in. Hosni Mubarak called Abu Ghraib "abhorrent and sickening, and against all human values and human rights confirmed and defended by the international community".

Denials of fair trials in Guantanamo, CIA black sites, renditions of terrorist suspects to third countries known to torture, and legal formulations paving the way for "enhanced interrogation techniques" all brought discussions of human rights

further to the fore of Arab consciousness. Instead of viewing human rights as a Western imposition, increasingly it became a language that Arab populations embraced to challenge America's post-9/11 policies.

Leaders in places like Yemen and Bahrain generally tolerated all of the local protests, conferences, media coverage, and slew of other mobilizations decrying post-9/11 abuses because they was directed at the United States, not them. It did not take long however for the focus to turn inward to the Arab world's own "Guantanamo's", "Abu Ghraib's," and widespread practice of torture. Activists began exploiting limited openings to draw compelling analogies to the repression pervading their own societies. In Jordan, human rights forces were able to gain access to the Hashemite Kingdom's prisons for the first time, initiate a public previously inconceivable debate on torture and eventually force King Abdullah to close down one of Jordan's most notorious prisons which had also been the site of American "War on Terror" renditions. Thus, American post-9/11 human rights abuses not only focused attention on and brought increased legitimacy to the human rights idea, they also opened up important avenues for the expression of longstanding rights aspirations. As the post-9/11 era progressed, the immense injustice of torture and false imprisonments- whether perpetrated by the United States or their own governments- came to occupy a central place in Arab sensibilities.

Islamists were no exception. After 9/11, they were often tied to terrorism and targeted by local regimes. When this happened, it was human rights defenders who often came to their aid, sometimes providing common cause between forces that had traditionally been at odds. In 2007 Yemeni women's rights activists who had condemned denials of due process to Islamists told me that they saw a new openness by Islah Party members to engage with them on women's rights issues. Perhaps more importantly, accusations of human rights violations became an integral strategy in Islamists' political challenges to local rulers. The Muslim Brotherhood's website has for years been replete with accusations of human rights violations and torture committed by the Mubarak regime. It is difficult to determine how much of the Islamist turn to human rights stems from a new consciousness and how much of it is purely strategic. But in the final analysis, it may not matter all that much. Once they adopt the discourse, labeling human rights "a foreign imposition" becomes an increasingly thorny undertaking.

Thus for some time now, as Americans have been gravitating towards the position that torture is sometimes necessary and terrorism suspects can be held indefinitely without trial, the Arab world has been inching towards a consensus on human rights. In many ways, the rise in rights consciousness evident in protests throughout the Arab world (epitomized by the January 25th slogan of "revolt against torture, poverty, unemployment and corruption" or the centrality of the torture case of Khaled Said in Egypt) follows this trend.

Undoubtedly, America's post-9/11 rights failings are just one of many factors coalescing to bring about the Arab world's current engagements with the human rights paradigm. Indeed, the most powerful catalyst for the dramatic events of the last two months is Arab populations' own lived experience of oppression. Still it is important to recognize that historically societies have often embraced human rights on the heels of a human rights tragedy that profoundly impacts them. In many ways, the post-9/11 denials of human rights that were overseen by George W. Bush were the Arab world's tragedy that brought to light the urgency of claiming rights.

Shadi Mokhtari's new book is available in hardback and will shortly be published in the paperback by Cambridge University Press