

Myths & Facts - Human Rights in Arab Countries

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MYTH

“The governments of Arab states grant basic human rights to their citizens.”

FACT

While much attention has been focused on alleged Israeli human rights violations in the volatile West Bank and Gaza, the popular press has chosen to virtually ignore violations of fundamental human rights that take place daily in almost every Arab country. According to annual reports compiled by the State Department, most of the Arab states are ruled by oppressive, dictatorial regimes, which deny their citizens basic freedoms of political expression, speech, press and due process. The *Arab Human Development Report* published by a group of Arab researchers from the UN Development Program concluded that out of the seven regions of the world, Arab countries had the lowest freedom score. They also had the lowest ranking for “voice and accountability,” a measure of various aspects of the political process, civil liberties, political rights and independence of the media.¹

MYTH

“Women’s rights are now protected in the Arab world.”

FACT

In most Arab countries, the Shari’a, or Islamic law, defines the rules of traditional social behavior. Under the law, women are accorded a role inferior to that of men, and are therefore discriminated against with regard to personal rights and freedoms.

As Middle East expert Daniel Pipes explains: “In the Islamic view...female sexuality is thought of as being so powerful that it constitutes a real danger to society.” Therefore, unrestrained females constitute “the most dangerous challenge facing males trying to carry out God’s commands.” In combination, females’ “desires and their irresistible attractiveness give women a power over men which rivals God’s.”²

“Left to themselves,” Pipes continues, “men might well fall victim to women and abandon God,” resulting in civil disorder among believers. In traditional thought, Pipes notes, women pose an internal threat to Islamic society similar to the external one represented by the infidel.

Traditionally, the Arab woman marries at a young age to a man of her father’s choice. A husband is entitled to divorce any time, even against his wife’s will, by merely declaring verbally that this is his intention.

Although the image of the egalitarian woman is slowly developing within some more secular Arab states, it remains largely confined to urban centers and upper-class circles. Ritual sexual mutilation of females is still common in rural areas of Egypt, Libya, Oman and Yemen.

Furthermore, laws that restrict women’s rights remain in force in almost all Arab countries. In Syria, a husband can prevent his wife from leaving the country. In Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Jordan, Morocco, Oman and Yemen, married women must have their husbands’ written permission to travel abroad, and they may be prevented from doing so for any reason. In Saudi Arabia, women must obtain written permission from their closest male relative to leave the country or travel on public transportation between different parts of the kingdom.

According to the UN, “utilization of Arab women’s capabilities through political and economic participation remains the lowest in the world in quantitative terms.... In some countries with

elected national assemblies, women are still denied the right to vote or hold office. And one in ever two Arab women can neither read nor write.”³

In a Saudi *Shari'a* court, the testimony of one man equals that of two women. In Kuwait, the male population is allowed to vote, while women are still disenfranchised. Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and Saudi Arabia all have laws stating that a woman's inheritance must be less than that of her male siblings (usually about half the size). Moroccan law excuses the murder or injury of a wife who is caught in the act of committing adultery; yet women are punished for harming their husbands under the same circumstances.

Wife-beating is a relatively common practice in Arab countries, and abused women have little recourse. As the State Department has noted regarding Jordan (and most of the Arab world): “Wife beating is technically grounds for divorce, but the husband may seek to demonstrate that he has authority from the Koran to correct an irreligious or disobedient wife by striking her.”⁴

In Saudi Arabia, restrictions against women are among the most extreme in the Arab world. Saudi women may not marry non-Saudis without government permission (which is rarely given); are forbidden to drive motor vehicles or bicycles; may not use public facilities when men are present; and are forced to sit in the backs of public buses, segregated from men. At Riyadh's King Saud University, professors lecture to rooms of men while women watch via closed-circuit television from distant all-female classrooms.⁵ “[Islamic] Advice columns” in the Saudi Arabian press recommend strict disciplining of women as part of a proper marriage. Women must cover their entire body and face in public, and those who do not are subject to physical harassment from the Saudi religious police, known as the Mutaaw'in. The Saudis even extend their discriminatory treatment to women abroad. During a visit to the United States by Crown Prince Abdullah, for example, the prince's aides requested that no female air traffic controllers be allowed to control his flight into Texas to meet President Bush. They also requested that no women be allowed on the airport tarmac with the jet.⁶

The UN, international organizations and local human rights nongovernmental organizations constantly pressure the regimes in Arab states to improve the state of human rights in general and women's rights in particular. According to UN data, the proportion of women's representation in Arab parliaments is only 3.4% (as opposed to 11.4% in the rest of the world). In addition, 55% of Arab women are illiterate. The Assistant to UN Vice Secretary General, Angela King, publicly called on Arab states to grant women their rights.⁷

Arab regimes find different ways to deal with the international pressure to improve women's rights. They often prefer to introduce mild improvements in women's status rather than to enacting radical reforms that might contradict their ideology and antagonize conservative elements in the country.

MYTH

“Freedom for Palestinians in the Palestinian Authority includes the right to sell land to Jews.”

FACT

In 1996, the Palestinian Authority (PA) Mufti, Ikremah Sabri, issued a *fatwa* (religious decree), banning the sale of Arab and Muslim property to Jews. Anyone who violated the order was to be killed. At least seven land dealers were killed that year. Six years later, the head of the PA's General Intelligence Service in the West Bank, General Tawfik Tirawi, admitted his men were responsible for the murders.⁸

On May 5, 1997, Palestinian Authority Justice Minister Freih Abu Middein announced that the death penalty would be imposed on anyone convicted of ceding “one inch” to Israel. Later that month, two Arab land dealers were killed. PA officials denied any involvement in the killings. A year later, another Palestinian suspected of selling land to Jews was murdered. The PA has also

arrested suspected land dealers for violating the Jordanian law (in force in the West Bank), which prohibits the sale of land to foreigners.⁹

MYTH

“Israel’s conflict with the Palestinians is blocking reform in the Middle East.”

FACT

The old saw that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is the source of all evil in the Middle East is being trotted out again to justify the failure of the Arab states to embrace President Bush’s democracy initiative or to reform their authoritarian societies. If the conflict was resolved tomorrow, or if Israel ceased to exist, however, the Arab world’s despots would be no more interested in reform than they are today.

The divisions among the Arabs were on display again in March 2004 when Tunisia abruptly cancelled a planned Arab League summit. While some of the Arab officials suggested that Israel was to blame, the Tunisians themselves made clear the problem was the unwillingness of the Arab states to agree on any reforms, or even to endorse the principal of democracy and reject extremism and terrorism. Tunisia’s official news agency noted that unspecified countries refused to support calls for “tolerance” and “understanding,” and would not allow the word “democracy” to appear in the final draft of a position paper to be approved by heads of state.¹⁰

At least seven Arab leaders had bowed out of the meeting and several countries, led by Syria, made clear their disinterest in committing the Arabs to institutional reform. And no Arab nation would support Libya’s suggestion that other governments follow its example and give up programs to develop weapons of mass destruction.¹¹

Of course the summit host, Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, is no democrat. He seized power in a 1987 palace coup and has ruled the country ever since. And he’s one of the newer Arab autocrats. Hosni Mubarak has ruled Egypt since Anwar Sadat’s assassination in 1981, Libya’s Moammar Gadhafi has been in power since 1969, and the Saud and Hashemite dynasties have maintained monarchies in Saudi Arabia and Jordan for decades. And even they are newcomers compared to the family that has ruled in Oman for 250 years. Lebanon is a puppet state under Syrian occupation, and Syria has been a dictatorship run by the Assad family since 1970. Yasser Arafat has dominated Palestinian politics for decades and has ruled the Palestinian Authority with an iron hand since its establishment in 1993.

None of these tyrants have any interest in implementing reforms that would permit the people to choose their leaders in a democratic way because they know they would be swept from power. They will therefore continue to use Israel’s existence as an excuse for avoiding any meaningful changes to their totalitarian societies.

MYTH

“The Palestinian Authority held a free, democratic election in 2005.”

FACT

Elections are not synonymous with democracy. Several Arab countries hold elections, including Egypt and Syria, but they have only one candidate, and there is no doubt about the outcome. The dictators are always reelected with nearly 100 percent of the vote. In those nations, no one seriously claims the elections are democratic.

In the case of the Palestinian Authority (PA) elections held in January 2005, the standards were higher. These were advertised as an example of democracy and, compared to other Arab states, the voting was a considerable advancement toward free elections.

Still, the election could hardly be called competitive as the outcome was never in doubt. Seven candidates ran for president, but the only question was the size of Mahmoud Abbas' margin of victory. He won with 62.3 percent of the vote. His nearest challenger was Mustafa Barghouti with 19.8 percent.¹²

The election had a much lower turnout than expected (62 percent), and supporters of the Islamic terrorist organizations largely boycotted the vote, as did Arabs living in east Jerusalem. Thus, Abbas was conservatively estimated by al-Jazeera to have received the support of only about one-third of the eligible voters.¹³

The election process went smoothly, and despite Palestinian predictions of Israeli interference, international observers reported that Palestinians were not obstructed by Israel from participating in the election. In fact, Palestinian and Israeli officials were said to have worked well together to facilitate voting.¹⁴

“Free elections can only take place in societies in which people are free to express their opinions without fear.” — Natan Sharansky ¹⁵

Immediately after the election, however, 46 officials from the PA Central Election Committee resigned, confirming suspicions of voting irregularities and fraud. The Committee had come under pressure from Abbas' staff to extend the vote by an additional two hours and to allow non-registered voters to cast ballots to guarantee a larger turnout and improve Abbas' chance of a “landslide” victory.

The day of the election, gunmen stormed the Committee offices to demand that Palestinians who were not registered be allowed to vote. The deputy chairman of the Committee, Ammar Dwaik, said he “was personally threatened and pressured” and confirmed that some voters were able to remove from their thumbs the ink that was supposed to prevent double voting.¹⁶

While Abbas is now seen as a legitimately elected leader by most Palestinians and the international community, the PA has no history of democratic institutions, so it remains in doubt whether the various terrorist groups will also accept his leadership, and whether the security services will enforce the president's will.

Natan Sharansky observed that “It is important that these elections took place, because it is important that the new leadership comes, or will come, not through violence. That can be the beginning of the process of democracy.”¹⁷ To move closer to true democracy, Abbas will also have to remove his predecessor's restrictions on the freedoms of speech, religion, assembly, and the press. Then perhaps the next election will be truly free and democratic.

HUMAN RIGHTS BY COUNTRY

(Unless otherwise noted, all information is from U.S. State Department Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2000-2001)

SAUDI ARABIA

Although the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom declared that, with the demise of the Taliban, Saudi Arabia is probably the worst oppressor of religious rights in the world, the Bush Administration decided on political grounds to leave the kingdom off its annual list of “countries of particular concern,” an American blacklist of countries that engage in “systematic, ongoing, and egregious” violations of the rights of religious minorities.¹⁸

Saudi Arabia is a dynastic monarchy, ruled by King Fahd Bin Abd Al-Aziz Al Saud. The country's constitution is the Koran and the Sunna (tradition) of the prophet Muhammad, and the country is thus governed by a strict interpretation of Islamic law. Because there are no democratic institutions, citizens have no role in the government. Security in the country is enforced by both a secular security force, and the Mutawwa'in, the religious police, who comprise the Committee

to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice. Because the traditional Islamic view of human rights does not coincide with the modern view, the government has allowed both the secular and religious security forces to commit serious abuses.

The Saudi government beheaded 52 people in 2003, for crimes including murder, robbery, drug smuggling, and homosexuality.¹⁹

Legal Rights

Torture, beatings, and other abuses of prisoners are committed regularly by both the Mutawwa'in and officials in the Ministry of Interior. Additionally, at least one person was killed recently by the Mutawwa'in for a very minor religious violation. Other executions during the year 2000 were for crimes ranging from deviant sexual behavior to sorcery, and were carried out by stoning, beheading, or firing squad; additionally, some prisoners were punished by amputations or the loss of an eye. Prisoners are sometimes held for long periods of time without charge or trial.

Freedom of speech and of the press are severely limited in Saudi Arabia; criticizing Islam or the Royal family is illegal, and can result in prolonged imprisonment without trial. Television, radio, internet and literature are all heavily censored. Freedom of assembly and association are also limited, subject to regulations such as the segregation of men and women at meetings.

Treatment of Women

Women are the victims of systematic discrimination in Saudi Arabia. Domestic violence and rape are widespread problems, and women have no redress for such crimes. Women cannot travel, be admitted to a hospital or drive in a car without their husband's permission. Buses are segregated, and women must sit in the rear. Those women not wearing an *abaya* (a black garment covering the entire body) and covering their faces and hair are harassed by the Mutawwa'in.

Laws that discriminate against women include those governing property ownership, testimony in court inheritance, and child custody in cases of divorce. Comprising only five percent of the workplace, it is nearly impossible for women to be employed in any but the simplest of tasks. Also, Female Genital Mutilation is legal and is practiced in some parts of Saudi Arabia.

Women from foreign countries also must adhere to the strict laws in Saudi Arabia and the U.S. military has gone so far as to require its female soldiers to wear restrictive clothing, ride in the back seat of cars, and have a male escort when off base. In 2001, the U.S. Air Force's highest-ranking female fighter pilot sued the U.S. government to overturn the policy on the grounds that it discriminates against women, violates their religious freedom, and forces them to follow customs required by a religion not their own. The Pentagon subsequently ended the requirement that women wear the black head-to-toe abayas worn by Saudi women, but the other restrictions still apply.²⁰

Worker's Rights

There are no labor laws, unions or collective bargaining in Saudi Arabia. While forced labor is technically illegal, foreign workers and domestic servants are sometimes forced to work up to sixteen hours daily, seven days a week. Pay is often withheld for weeks or months at a time.

Unconfirmed reports indicate that women are sometimes smuggled into Saudi Arabia to work as prostitutes, and children are smuggled in to work in organized begging rings. Officially, trafficking in persons is illegal under Saudi law.

Treatment of Minorities

There is no freedom of religion in Saudi Arabia. All citizens must be Muslims, and only the Sunni branch of Islam can be practiced publicly. There is institutional discrimination against Shi'a

Muslims. Religions other than Islam are tolerated if practiced discreetly; a number of Christians were deported in 2000 because they practiced apostasy in too public a manner.

Asian and African workers living in Saudi Arabia report widespread discrimination, and difficulty in the redress of grievances.

JORDAN

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is a constitutional monarchy ruled by King Abdullah bin Hussein. While direct elections are used to appoint representatives to the uninfluential lower house of Parliament, the 104-seat Chamber of Deputies, the upper house, the 40-seat senate, is appointed by the king. Virtually all power is concentrated in the king, who can dismiss any representative or disband the parliament altogether, as he did in June 2001. Thus, citizens of Jordan cannot change their government. Many serious human rights violations occur in Jordan and are condoned by the government.

Legal Rights

Jordanian security forces use torture on a regular basis, which has recently resulted in several deaths. Prisoners are often held without charges, are not allowed to meet with lawyers, and are kept in unsanitary conditions; this applies also to journalists charged with defamation, meaning they criticized the government or the king. Forced expulsions are rare in Jordan, and are generally used only on suspected terrorists; terrorist groups are well represented in Jordan. For example, the Islamic Movement of Jordan (“The Group of Ahmed Al Daganesh”) and the Nobles of Jordan claimed responsibility for the August 2001 murder of an Israeli businessman in Amman. The government denied that the killing was political and has made no arrests in the case.

Freedom of assembly, association, the press and speech are all restricted by the government; authors of articles critical or satirical of the government are often arrested and imprisoned. In August 2002, the Al-Jazeera television network’s license was revoked for airing views critical of the government.²¹

Women’s Rights

Jordanian women are at a distinct legal disadvantage. Marital rape is legal, wife-beating is rampant, and often allowed by law, and honor crimes (domestic violence against women committed by men who feel the women have undermined their honor by their “immoral behavior”) receive minimal sentences. Such honor crimes have become so common that they comprise 25% of the total murders committed in Jordan in 2000, according to one study.

Financially, women are at a legal disadvantage as well. Social security, inheritance, divorce and testimony laws all favor men. Women earn less than men for equal work, and are under-represented in the workplace.

Female Genital Mutilation, once practiced widely in Jordan, has largely been discontinued. Some tribes, however, maintain the practice. Much more common is the abuse of female children, especially sexual abuse. While the law calls for strict punishment in such cases, few are ever investigated.

Workers’ Rights

Labor laws are generally good; however, there are exceptions. Although forced labor is illegal in Jordan, many foreign servants work under conditions that amount to forced labor. Additionally, child labor is common, although the government has taken steps to curb it.

Treatment of Minorities

Freedom of religion is for the most part respected in Jordan. While only the three main monotheistic religions (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity) are officially recognized by the

government, all other religions are permitted to practice freely, and are given equal rights. The one exception to this rule is the Baha'i faith, members of which face official, systematic discrimination. They are, however, allowed to practice openly.

Following the 1948 war, and again following the 1967 war, Jordan granted citizenship to Palestinian refugees fleeing from Israel. However, refugees who arrived since then have not been granted citizenship, and are widely discriminated against.

LEBANON

Since ending a 16-year civil war in 1991, Lebanon has been primarily controlled by Syria, which stations 25,000 soldiers in the country. Thus, although Lebanon is technically a parliamentary republic, neither citizens nor government officials have much of a role in changing their government, because Syria makes all policy decisions and heavily influence the elections. The Lebanese government and army do not respect human rights, and the several terrorist organizations that are headquartered in Lebanon commit abuses as well.

Legal Rights

While official governmental killings are unknown in Lebanon, there have been numerous disappearances and deaths of political prisoners in prison awaiting trial. Arbitrary arrests are common, and some prisoners are held for long periods of time without trials or charges. The use of torture is reportedly widespread. In the areas of the country controlled by the Syrian-backed militia Hizballah, only Islamic law is applied; in the independent Palestinian refugee camps in the south, no specific law system is endorsed. In both locations, human rights violations abound.

Freedom of speech and of the press are granted by law, and respected for the most part; however, cases of censorship are common. The right to assembly granted by law is restricted by the government. In August 2001, mostly Christian students staged a non-violent protest against Syria's role in Lebanon and were beat up by security forces. Days earlier, other anti-Syrian activists were arrested.²²

In August 2001, Lebanese security forces arrested a Christian journalist in a crackdown on anti-Syrian Christian dissidents. The week before about 200 members of Christian-led opposition groups that oppose Syria's control over Lebanon were arrested.²³

Inhabitants of Lebanon have suffered from the numerous competing terrorist groups that operate inside Lebanon. These groups either attack targets within the country, or attack Israel to the south; when they do the latter, Lebanon's population is forced to bear the brunt of the reprisals. However, attacks on Israel by Syrian-backed Hezbollah and other terrorist groups have significantly decreased since Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May of 2000.

Women's Rights

Domestic violence and rape are significant social problems, and affect a large segment of the population. Honor Crimes are illegal, but reduced sentences are applied in such cases.

While technically women can enter any profession they wish, there is strong societal pressure that prevents most women from doing so. Many other laws in Lebanon are based on Islamic law, and are discriminatory against women and children.

Workers' Rights

Forced labor is not illegal, and many foreign servants, women, and children are compelled to work against their will. Child labor in general is rampant. Children suffer under Lebanese law in other ways as well: child abuse, kidnappings, and even the sale of children to adoption agencies are relatively common, and ignored by the government.

Treatment of Minorities

Freedom of religion is generally respected, although some discrimination is built into the legal system: for example, certain government positions can only be held by certain types of Muslims. Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon have no rights, and cannot become citizens of the state.

SYRIA

Technically, Syria is a parliamentary democracy in which officials are appointed through direct elections; in practice, President Bashar Assad wields virtually absolute power. When his father Hafez Assad died on June 10, 2000, after a 30-year reign, Bashar ran unopposed for the post, and consequently, the minimum age required by law for a president was lowered from 40 to 34, Bashar's age. Because of an emergency martial law that has been in place since 1963, powerful security services and militias operate independent of each other, and unimpeded by the government. Human rights are significantly restricted by the government, and the security services commit serious abuses as well.

Legal Rights

Because of the power of the security services, the legal rights of citizens of Syria are not enforced. Arbitrary arrests, torture and disappearances of prisoners all occur regularly. Syrian, Lebanese and Jordanian political prisoners have been held incommunicado by the government for long periods of time, as have missing Israeli soldiers captured by Syria, and Hezbollah, the terrorist organization it backs in Lebanon. Prisoners captured as many as twenty years ago remain unaccounted for.

Freedom of speech and of the press are granted by law, but severely restricted. Publication of any false information published that opposes the goals of the revolution is punishable by lengthy jail sentences. All press industries are owned and operated by the government. In 2001, ten pro-democracy activists were arrested and convicted of inciting rebellion, disseminating lies and trying to change the constitution by force.²⁴

Freedom of association is severely restricted by the government, and freedom of assembly does not exist at all.

Women's Rights

Domestic violence occurs in Syria, though little is known about its extent. Spousal rape is not illegal, and honor crimes occur. Legally, many financial laws, such as inheritance and social security, discriminate against women, and the punishment for adultery for women is twice that of men. Women cannot travel outside the country without their husband's permission. Women are employed in all areas, but are under-represented in most fields.

Workers' Rights

Child labor is common, despite laws to the contrary. Additionally, the rights to form unions and bargain collectively are restricted.

Treatment of Minorities

Freedom of religion is generally respected, with two exceptions: Jews are systematically excluded from government involvement, and lack many basic rights; and extreme Islamic groups are frequently targeted for attacks and discrimination, due to the numerous Islamic terrorist groups that oppose the government.

Kurds are systematically oppressed by Syria: they cannot become citizens, they have few rights, and the teaching of their language and culture is outlawed by the government.

IRAQ

The constitution of Iraq grants rule to the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party, which is dominated by Saddam Hussein and his relatives. Hussein attempts to legitimate his rule by referring to an October 1995 referendum, in which he received 99.9 percent of the vote. This election, however, had neither secret ballots nor opposing candidates, and Iraqi citizens reported that they feared reprisals if they cast a dissenting vote. Iraq's record on human rights indicates that this fear was warranted. Iraq's government commits serious human rights violations, primarily through the various militias that operate in the state. These militias are instrumental in maintaining an atmosphere of fear and repression.

Legal Rights

The government's police tactics are among the most brutal in the world. Citizens are routinely arrested and executed for such crimes as defecting, criticizing the government and prostitution. Additionally, criminals charged with lesser crimes are routinely killed *en masse* as part of a prison cleansing system designed to reduce the prison population. Political or religious figures who are viewed as a threat to Saddam or other higher-ups are killed without compunction, and without being charged with a specific crime. Those who are charged with specific crimes rarely receive fair trials, as any court's decision can be overridden by the President. Sometimes trials are not held at all. Torture is used systematically in Iraqi prisons.

While the government officially respects the rights to freedom of speech, press, assembly, and association, all these rights are restricted in practice. The government owns all the newspapers in the country, and operates them as propaganda sources. Any statements critical of the government are harshly punished, and citizens who assemble peacefully have been repressed, and sometimes attacked by government militias.

Allegations of serious war crimes have been frequently directed against Iraq. Atrocities committed during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, and during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, are mirrored to this day, as Iraqi forces fighting with the Kurdish army that controls the north of Iraq routinely target civilians, and plant mines in civilian areas. UN inspectors who were monitoring Iraq's military and chemical weapons plants were summarily expelled in 1997.

Women's Rights

Domestic violence occurs in Iraq, but no statistics exist to account for its frequency. Honor crimes are legitimate under Iraqi law, and crimes such as prostitution are often punished by beheading. Numerous laws are in place guaranteeing rights for women in the workplace, but it is difficult to determine how successful they have been in producing equality.

Workers' Rights

Workers have virtually no rights in Iraq. Unions are illegal, and while forced labor is technically illegal, resigning from one's job can result in a prison sentence. Child labor is not uncommon, despite government regulations to the contrary.

Treatment of Minorities

Freedom of religion is technically in place, but not respected by the government. While the majority of the population consists of Shi'a Muslims, the Sunni minority controls the Ba'ath Party. Thus, Shi'a religious and lay leaders are frequently assassinated or repressed. The small Christian community has been subjected to abuses as well.

The Kurds that control the north of Iraq have been severely oppressed. Kurds are prohibited from living in Iraq proper, and those in the north have been subjected to atrocities by the Iraqi military, including torture, summary executions and attacks on civilian centers using chemical weapons.

EGYPT

According to its constitution, Egypt is a social democracy in which Islam is the state religion. The President and his National Democratic Party, however, control the political scene to such an extent that citizens do not have a meaningful ability to change their government. There has been an Emergency Law in effect since 1981, allowing the government to arbitrarily detain persons without charge, and to regularly deny legal rights to Egyptian citizens.

Legal Rights

Freedom of speech and of the press are guaranteed by the Constitution, but are often withheld in practice. The government owns and controls the three largest newspapers and holds a monopoly on printing and distribution. Thus, newspapers rarely criticize the government, and the output of opposition parties' newspapers is limited. Scholars and officials who criticize the government are often charged with the crimes of libel, slander, or disseminating false information about Egypt, and are imprisoned. Freedom of association and assembly are severely restricted.

Physical or psychological torture, while officially outlawed, are nonetheless common, and it is reported that at least eight prisoners were tortured to death in the year 2000. Prison conditions are squalid. The Egyptian police routinely arrest prisoners arbitrarily, often holding them for long periods of time without charge, trial or access to a lawyer.

“[Egypt’s] autocratic regime, established a half-century ago under the banner of Arab nationalism and socialism, is politically exhausted and morally bankrupt. Mr. Mubarak, who checked Islamic extremists in Egypt only by torture and massacre, has no modern political program or vision of progress to offer his people as an alternative to Osama bin Laden’s Muslim victimology. Those Egyptians who have tried to promote such a program...are unjustly imprisoned. Instead, Mr. Mubarak props himself up with \$2 billion a year in U.S. aid, while allowing and even encouraging state-controlled clerics and media to promote the anti-Western, anti-modern and anti-Jewish propaganda of the Islamic extremists. The policy serves his purpose by deflecting popular frustration with the lack of political freedom or economic development in Egypt. It also explains why so many of Osama bin Laden’s recruits are Egyptian.” — *Washington Post* editorial ²⁵

Women’s Rights

Domestic violence is a serious social problem in Egypt; one report concluded that one in three married women has been beaten by her husband. Additionally, marital rape is legal. Female Genital Mutilation still occurs, and a majority of women undergo the procedure. In the business world, women are guaranteed pay equal to that of men, but there are strong societal pressures against women being employed. Legally, many laws, particularly inheritance laws, favor males, and men who kill women in honor killings receive significantly lighter sentences than women who kill men under similar circumstances.

Workers’ Rights

Labor laws in Egypt do not provide adequately for union members; striking is illegal and punishable by prison terms. Many government mandated labor laws are not enforced, such as minimum wages and maximum hours. While child labor has been a problem in Egypt in the past, there has been marked improvement recently.

Treatment of Minorities

Egypt guarantees freedom of religion, and the Jewish and Christian communities are generally treated well. Nevertheless, the Christian minority has reported that it is sometimes discriminated against, and there have been reports of forced conversions to Islam. Members of the Baha’i faith are categorically banned from practicing or living in Egypt.

PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY

The Palestinian Authority's poor human rights record worsened after the onset of the "al-Aqsa intifada." In September 2000 as members of the Palestinian security services and Fatah's Tanzim participated in violent attacks against Israeli civilians and soldiers. Because armed Palestinians often launched their attacks near the homes of Palestinian civilians; residents of the homes sometimes found themselves in the line of fire when Israel retaliated. Palestinian security forces also failed to prevent armed Palestinians from opening fire on Israelis in places where bystanders were present.

Legal Rights

On December 2, 2001, Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat declared a state of emergency and granted himself broad legal powers.

PA security forces arbitrarily arrest and detain persons, and prolonged detention and lack of due process are prevalent. The courts do not ensure fair and expeditious trials. The PA executive and security services frequently ignore or fail to enforce court decisions.

The PA does not prohibit by law the use of torture or force against detainees, and PA security forces reportedly were responsible for torture and widespread abuse of Palestinian detainees. International human rights monitoring groups have documented widespread arbitrary and abusive conduct by the PA. These organizations state that use of torture is widespread and not restricted to those persons detained on security charges. At least five Palestinians died in PA custody during 2001.

PA security forces infringed on citizens' rights to privacy and restricted freedom of speech and of the press by closing down media outlets, banning publications or broadcasts, and periodically harassing or detaining members of the media. For example, after the brutal killing of two IDF reserve soldiers at a Ramallah police station on October 12, 2000, Palestinian police confiscated film from several journalists who were at the scene. On October 4, a foreign journalist filmed three members of the Palestinian security forces distributing Molotov cocktails to several children. The security forces detained the journalist and his crew for several hours and destroyed the roll of film. PA harassment contributed to the practice of self-censorship by many Palestinian commentators, reporters, and critics.

Violence Against Israelis

Palestinian violence during the "al-Aqsa intifada" included violent demonstrations, shootings and incidents in which Palestinians usually threw stones and Molotov cocktails at IDF checkpoints. Israeli civilians and Jews in the territories became frequent targets of drive-by shootings and ambushes, suicide and other bombings, mortar attacks, and armed attacks on settlements and military bases. Palestinians acting individually, or in unorganized or small groups, including some members of Palestinian security services, killed 87 Israelis in the territories in 2001. Off-duty members of PA security forces and members of Chairman Arafat's Fatah faction participated in some of these attacks.

Several Palestinian terrorist groups, including Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), and Fatah-affiliated groups such as the al-Aqsa Brigades, have also claimed responsibility for attacks specifically targeting civilians within Israel proper. The PA had made few arrests in these killings by year's end.

An estimated 340 suspected collaborators and 180 to 200 political prisoners were held in PA jails at the end of 2001. A number of Palestinians suspected of collaboration with the Israeli government were arrested, tried and executed. Dozens more were simply murdered.²⁶

Women's Rights

Spousal abuse, sexual abuse, and honor killings occur, but societal pressures prevent most incidents from being reported and most cases are handled within the families concerned, usually by male family members.

Palestinian women endure various forms of social prejudice and repression within their society. Because of early marriage, girls frequently do not finish the mandatory level of schooling. Cultural restrictions sometimes prevent women from attending colleges and universities. While there is an active women's movement in the West Bank, serious attention has shifted only recently from nationalist aspirations to issues that greatly affect women, such as domestic violence, equal access to education and employment, and laws concerning marriage and inheritance. Women who marry outside of their faith, particularly Christian women who marry Muslim men, often are disowned by their families and sometimes are harassed and threatened with death.

A growing number of Palestinian women work outside the home, where they tend to encounter discrimination. There are no special laws that provide for women's rights in the workplace. Women are underrepresented in most aspects of professional life.

Workers' Rights

There is no minimum wage in the West Bank or Gaza Strip and no laws that protect the rights of striking workers. In practice, such workers have little or no protection from an employer's retribution. In early 2000, West Bank teachers held a strike. On May 5, 2000, PA officials arrested one of the strike leaders for criticizing the PA during a radio interview. The radio station was also shut down. The teachers suspended their strike on May 17, despite the fact that none of their demands were met.

Child labor is a problem.

Treatment of Minorities

No PA law protects religious freedom; however, the PA generally respects freedom of religion. In past years, there were allegations that several converts from Islam to Christianity at times are subject to societal discrimination and harassment by PA officials. However, there was no pattern of PA discrimination and harassment against Christians.

“It is hard to know what is more alarming -- a toxic statement of hatred of Jews by the Malaysian prime minister at an Islamic summit meeting this week, or the unanimous applause it engendered from the kings, presidents, and emirs in the audience. The words uttered by the prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, in a speech to the 57-member Organization of the Islamic Conference on Thursday were sadly familiar: Jews, he asserted, may be few in number, but they seek to run the world.... Sympathy for the Muslims' plight must not be confused with the acceptance of racism. Most Muslims have indeed been shoddily treated — by their own leaders who gather at feckless summit meetings instead of offering their people what they most need: human rights, education and democracy.” — *New York Times* editorial ²⁷

Notes

¹ *Arab Human Development Report 2002*, NY: UN, 2002.

² Daniel Pipes, *In the Path of God: Islam and Political Power*, (NY: Basic Books, 1983), p. 177.

³ *Arab Human Development Report 2002*, NY: UN, 2002.

⁴ [U.S. State Department, Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1999.](#)

⁵ Martin Peretz, “Remembering Saudi Arabia,” *The New Republic*, (January 28, 2002).

⁶ *USA Today*, (April 29, 2002).

⁷ *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* (London), (December 4, 1999).

- ⁸ [Jerusalem Post](#), (August 19, 2002).
- ⁹ State Department. Human Rights Report for the Occupied Territories, [1997](#), [1998](#).
- ¹⁰ Associated Press, (March 28, 2004).
- ¹¹ [Washington Post](#), (March 29, 2004).
- ¹² [CNN.com](#) (January 10, 2005).
- ¹³ [Aljazeera.Net](#), (January 11, 2005).
- ¹⁴ [CNN.com](#), (January 10, 2005); Herb Keinon, "Observer teams validate PA elections," [Jerusalem Post](#), (January 11, 2005).
- ¹⁵ Herb Keinon, "Sharansky: PA election not 'truly free,'" [Jerusalem Post](#), (January 11, 2005).
- ¹⁶ [Aljazeera.Net](#), (January 15, 2005); [Jerusalem Post](#), (January 16, 2005).
- ¹⁷ Herb Keinon, "Sharansky: PA election not 'truly free,'" [Jerusalem Post](#), (January 11, 2005).
- ¹⁸ [Newsweek](#), (March 10, 2003).
- ¹⁹ CBS News, (June 25, 2004).
- ²⁰ [Washington Post](#), (December 4, 2001).
- ²¹ [Jewish Telegraphic Agency](#), (August 9, 2002).
- ²² [Jerusalem Report](#), (March 25, 2002).
- ²³ [CNN](#), (August 16, 2001).
- ²⁴ [Jerusalem Post](#), (July 1, 2002); BBC News, (August 11, 2002).
- ²⁵ [Washington Post](#) editorial, (October 11, 2001).
- ²⁶ Isabel Kershner, "Below the Law," [Jerusalem Report](#), (April 22, 2002), pp. 32-33.
- ²⁷ [New York Times](#) editorial, (October 18, 2003).