



Human Rights and US Foreign Policy Event Recap



On May 17th, the National Interest Foundation hosted its 3rd annual conference, “Human rights and U.S. Foreign Policy”, in the Rayburn House office building. The conference aimed to analyze areas U.S. Foreign policy falls short when defending human rights and the different ways we can innovate our policies to more align with the ideals of human rights. The conference began with opening remarks from the president of the National Interest Foundation, Khaled Saffuri. In his opening statement, he

commented on the immense repercussions of U.S. foreign policy due to the extent of its power. The conference was composed of 3 panels titled, “Idealized Concepts and Strained Realities – U.S. Foreign Policy and Human Rights: The Congressional Approach”, “In Search of a Better Approach – U.S. Foreign Policy and Human Rights”, and “The Unseen Hand – U.S. Foreign Policy and the Influence of Foreign Interests.”

Panel I- Idealized Concepts and Strained Realities – U.S. Foreign Policy and Human Rights: The Congressional Approach



The first panel focused on Congress's role in policymaking and the effects politics often have on when and if the United States defends human rights. This panel consisted of Congressman Gerry Connolly, Fmr. Congressman Jim Moran, and Bruce Fein. It was moderated by Ambassador Osman Siddique. Ambassador Siddique, who was the former U.S. ambassador to the Republic of Fiji began the panel by highlighting the importance of conversation between opposing factions to create better policy. He went on to

describe how the United States was founded on the principle that every human being was created equal. Every human has fundamental human rights, and the United States should use its immense power to effect positive change in the world. Unfortunately, the United States implements its policies to defend its own interest without any consideration for the effects it will have on the country on the receiving end. He finished by putting forth the idea that our ability to defend human rights is greatly affected by how our local identity is communicated abroad.

Congressman Gerry Connolly, who represents Virginia's 11th congressional District spoke next. He echoed Ambassador Siddique's statements that the United States was founded on the principle that every human being was created equally. Though out history, the United States has made progress in some areas but also regressed in others. Despite its flaws, the U.S. must continue to improve its defense of human rights.

Bruce Fein, the former associate deputy attorney general under President Ronald Reagan, followed Connolly's statement. He began his comments by stating, "A life disengaged from justice is not a life worth living." He also pointed out that the struggle for human rights has been long and is still ongoing. He closed by putting forth that despite national interests often being put before human rights when it comes to policymaking, we must never fail to get this reversed.

Fmr. Congressman Jim Moran closed out the session by saying the United States may have a flawed history, but that it should learn from its mistakes. In the past, the U.S. has been hypocritical with many of its foreign policies, often treating countries differently if they were allies or valuable to the U.S. in some way. This practice erodes the United States' legitimacy and continues to undermine its defense of human rights. We must reevaluate who we engage with to recover this legitimacy. The panel ended with a Q&A session with the audience.

Panel II- In Search of a Better Approach – U.S. Foreign Policy and Human Rights



The second panel explored different ways in which U.S. foreign policy could be innovated to address current human rights abuses better. The panel consisted of Sahar Aziz, Andrea Prasow, Bassam Barabandi, and Radwan Masmoudi. It was moderated by Saul Anuzis. Anuzis, a principal at Coast-to-Cost Strategies, began the second panel by describing how the United States needed to strike a balance between our national interest and human rights. The US must innovate modern policies to address modern

human rights challenges.

Next, Sahar Aziz, a law professor at Rutgers Law School, spoke. She questioned if the United States ever took human rights seriously. She argued that it is rather used as a tool to retain control over its interests. The U.S. does not prioritize human rights in its day-to-day practices. This can be seen in its engagement with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other human rights abusers, as well as its treatment of detainees. Human rights abusers must be held accountable for the rule we put forth to actually matter. This will be an important step in the ongoing campaign for human rights.

Andrea Prasow, the executive director of the Freedom Initiative spoke next. She began by explaining that certain aspects of human rights are popular at a political level. For example, there is broad support for the release of political prisoners. In reality, though, many political prisoners are often overlooked. She also showed the importance of rhetoric. Instances like Biden's fist bump with MBS sends a message of indifference to authoritarian regimes like Saudi Arabia. The United States must be consistent in its practices and its criticisms. She closed her statement by declaring that the United States must seek ways to consolidate its foreign policy with human rights.

Next, Bassam Barabandi, the co-founder of People Demand Change, spoke about the difference between the public and private rhetoric of the United States. The United States often publicly criticizes human rights abuses but is also eager to capitalize on opportunities that arise from these abuses. A key example is when the U.S. turned a blind eye to Iran's actions in Syria to secure a nuclear deal. America's messaging regarding its norms and values and confusing and inconsistent. He closed by explaining that we must align our public and private rhetoric by more openly opposing all forms of authoritarianism and supporting democratic change.

Radwan Masmoudi, the president of the Study of Islam and Democracy, finished the event by exposing the lie that is often marketed to justify American foreign policy. That is that dictatorships provide stability. In reality, they provide fake stability. This fake stability can explode at any moment. Dictators often use this lie to build their reputations and fund institutions to spread this lie. He went on to describe the interconnectedness between democracy and human rights. Performative human rights are a common strategy employed by authoritarian regimes. He ended his statement by emphasizing the

importance of getting the American people to care about human rights. We must present a united front if we want to make any true progress. The panel closed after a short Q&A session.

Panel III- The Unseen Hand – U.S. Foreign Policy and the Influence of Foreign Interests



The final panel looked into the influence foreign interests have on U.S. Foreign Policy. This panel consisted of Sarah Leah Whitson, Fmr. Congressman Tom Davis, Khalid Al-Jabri, Matthew Hedges, and Doug Bandow. It was moderated by Bruce DeValle. DeValle, a lawyer specializing in human rights and constitutional law, began the session by outlining the importance of knowing who is advising American policymakers.

Sarah Leah Whitson, the executive director of Democracy in the Arab World Now, began by exploring the vast amount of foreign influence on American Foreign Policy. One of the biggest of these is the influence of oil producers. We have made multiple concessions to secure cheap oil, including the Abraham Accords. Another thing that often influences human rights is the military-industrial complex and weapons sales. The most egregious example is America's unwavering support of Israel despite the multiple human rights violations. She went on to describe how these concessions will also have long-term consequences for the national interest of the United States. It has already had negative impacts on our influence across the world. All of these concessions are often promoted by lobbyists in Congress. She closed her statement by saying that regulations must be implemented to stop foreign lobbyists.

The next speaker was Khalid Al-Jabri, a human rights advocate. He explained that human rights are often at the bottom of the agenda. Instead, policies are usually influenced by lobbyists of foreign powers, weapons manufacturers, and think tanks that are funded by foreign powers. These think tanks use their influence to shift the conversation in exchange for massive amounts of funding from authoritarian regimes. There is a lack of legislation to prevent this foreign influence. This is because former politicians are often rewarded with high-paying jobs and investments for past political favors. Litigation is a potential strategy but is often too close to the problem to truly address the influence foreign powers have on the U.S.

The next speaker was former Congressman Tom Davis. He described the hypocrisy that is often present in politics. Many of the officials responsible for foreign policy are not scrutinized. Lobbyists that benefit

authoritarian regimes are often also better funded and organized. He closed by explaining how democracy can often be messy, which also makes it a difficult sell.

Matthew Hedges, an academic from Durham University, spoke next. He began his segment by explaining the importance of today's conversation. As the United States shifts away from the war on terror, it must reassess who it relies on. Countries like the UAE can no longer be depended upon. Many of our past allies that we utilized during the war on terror are actively sabotaging American interests. He closed his statement by exploring the potential effects this move will have on the international community.

Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, closed out the panel. He began by explaining how America's vast interests make it vulnerable to foreign influence. The apathy of a majority of the American public worsens this weakness. The United States' immense power also makes it a very valuable target to countries that want to further their power. He closed the panel by explaining the importance of addressing foreign influence and how in the future, the effects of this foreign influence will be domestically felt.

We would like to thank all of the speakers who participated as well as those who attended the conference both in person and online. Conferences like these are an important step in evaluating and improving U.S. Foreign and ensuring it aligns with the American value of human rights.